Cor Aut Mors (Heart or Death)

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Cor Aut Mors (Heart or Death)

by Beelieve

Summary

Galahad swallowed, tilting his head as far as the unwelcome grip on his face would allow. The corner of his mouth lifted, innocent and seductive and so, so very young. “I would not struggle; I would be yours. Why fight for what can be—” Galahad paused, his smile deepening as he chose his final words, “—freely given?”

Notes

About the Non-Con Warning: I feel the story leans more Dub Con in a lot of ways (the dubbiest of dub con to ever dub con). So while the "non-con" isn't graphic, per se, there's plenty of coercion and some general unpleasantness.

About Galahad: I’m envisioning Galahad to be about 19 or 20, and I picture him looking like John Truscott from The Sleeping Dictionary during the first part of the story. I’m sorry.

About History: Dear history, I’m sorry. I’m literally making shit up when it suits me. [INSERT LIST OF TEACHERS I SHOULD APOLOGIZE TO IN ORDER OF THEIR LIKELY DISAPPOINTMENT IN ME HERE]

About Comments/Kudos: Please and thank you.

Chapter 1

* * *

(-now-)

The attack came before dawn, a single spy paid his weight in gold to turn a blind eye to the west of the Wall.

As a dozen men encroached upon the Roman outpost, scouts and skirmishers leading the silent vanguard, an army waited and watched in the darkness of the forest beyond. A cry went up as the perimeter broke—a terrified plea, followed quickly by indelible quiet. Though most of the camp still slept, a baker had risen early to light his family's hearth, his daily trek across the *via principalis* unwittingly interrupted by the flash of a curved blade. His death was quick—the first of many that day—but the resulting commotion was enough to draw the attention of the shift guards patrolling the eastern watchtower.

A booming voice called out a warning and the alarm bells swung rapidly, clanging their ominous message: *intruders*, *intruders, intruders*. More shouts of alarm followed, accompanied by the growing din of Roman soldiers pouring out of their barracks in nightshirts and breeches.

Moments before the disturbance, Tristan startled awake.

He lay still in his bed, darkness filling the room. It was early yet; *too early*, even for one long accustomed to a dayspring rise. Murky indigo light crept through the cracks in the shutters, night's lingering shadows soon to be burnt away by the sunrise. Outside his window the outpost was quiet—frighteningly peaceful, in its own way—though no more so than usual this time of morning. Tristan blinked, his vision adjusting to the dark. The siren call of sleep was almost enough to soothe the tendrils of unease that coiled in his gut, the temptation to close his eyes again far too appealing. Even he had his limits, after such an evening of festivity.

Amongst other things, he thought wearily, pulling himself up in bed nevertheless.

He'd always had a good instinct for trouble. His brothers, whether in friendly jest or earnest sincerity, had attributed Tristan's perceived talent to all manner of fictions: otherworldly glimmers, mystical alchemy. Most of them didn't truly believe it—any more so than they believed in Arthur's trinity of spirits—but he let them keep their superstitions, if only to amuse himself. Their placation also meant the stories spread, and there were always new Romans arriving. Best for them to keep a wide berth, least they try to make friends. Tristan could abide by many indignities, but idle chatter amongst fresh-faced Romans simply wasn't one of them.

Trouble or not, he was awake. He couldn't explain why he'd been roused; it had simply happened. The curse of a naturally light sleeper, and a skill no one could truly teach. At times he envied his brothers, most of whom could sleep through nearly anything: the snores of a partner; a scuttling field mouse; the call of a bird in the wee hours of the morning.

Tristan frowned, his eyes darting to the window.

A delicate chirp echoed back and forth across the bastion wall outside. Two sparrowhawks, talking to each other in quiet whoops. Another whistle followed shortly after, this time answered from across the wall; then, once again, farther out. It was too early for sparrowhawks—almost an hour before even the cocks would start their own peculiar rumpus. The gods had not cursed Tristan with special sight, that he knew for certain, but prediction came easily enough, if one knew what to observe. It was a good imitation of a sparrowhawk—enough to fool his sleep-addled mind, even for a moment—but no human could mimic such a unique sound.

It's a signal.

A scream shattered the silence outside.

Tristan slipped out of bed and into his boots with practiced ease, cursing to himself.

What a fool he'd been, thinking himself safe, simply because he and the others were tucked behind the outpost's solid stone walls. Peace never lasted; *couldn't* last. Not for men like him.

Tristan slide his leather jerkin over his sleep shirt and breeches, tightening the rawhide gathering around his waist before darting toward the window. He leaned outside, risking exposure as he opened the shutters, his eyes scanning the courtyard below. A bonfire on the opposite end of the square reflected only shadows, but Tristan saw what he needed: Men in dark armor dropping over the walls, curved swords at their side.

There was little to identify them, save the knowledge they didn't move like Woads.

Fuck.

Tristan rushed from his room, pounding on the doors that lined the hallway where his brothers slept. He took stock as he went, forcing open the doors: Dagonet lacing his boots; Percival stumbling out of his rack; Bors naked and struggling to pull on his breeches as Lyra looked on calmly from their bed, pregnant stomach resting atop her crossed legs. Gawain and Mordred were missing from their shared quarters, though that wasn't uncommon after such a debaucherous evening.

A panicked woman ran from Lamorak's chamber as Tristan passed, and he half expected the same when he reached Lancelot's door—two suitors even, had the night been fruitful—but he found Lancelot alone and already in his armor.

"Woads?" Lancelot asked, fastening his belt as he stood in the doorway. When Tristan shook his head, Lancelot startled, the next question clear upon his face: *If not Woads, then who?*

Across the hall, Tristan kicked open the last door to find the room empty.

“Bedivere was drunk last night,” Lancelot offered, appearing at Tristan’s side. “He fell asleep in the stables. Galahad stayed to watch over him.”

Tristan turned, his last conversation with Galahad burned into his thoughts.

“Take your hand off me.”

“Not until you listen.”

More screams sounded from below as the clash of swords grew louder.

Lancelot took his elbow. “We'll find them, but we must get to Arthur and regroup.”

A moment later, the knights burst into the courtyard, pushing through the doors together to surprise a phalanx of attackers.

Tristan brought his sword to bear, striking downward at the figure before him. As the man fell, Tristan pivoted, smoke swirling around him. He coughed, the air burning his lungs as fire swept through the output, the canteen shops and barracks being deliberately set ablaze with men inside. Across the plaza the stables were already engulfed, flames licking at the wooden beams intersecting the thatched roof. A tipped wagon had been pushed against the doors, blocking their access to the horses.

Tristan froze, a cold dread seeping into his bones as he remembered Lancelot’s earlier words.

No, gods no.

Please no.

A figure swung at him from behind, the man’s sword grazing the back of his neck. Tristan parried, twisting his blade against the weapon now aimed for his head. Steel met steel and he stepped backward, knocking his attacker off balance. Tristan turned, slashing his sword across the man’s throat as behind him another assailant swung wildly, tearing the back of Tristan’s jerkin but missing the flesh beneath. He blocked the next blow but faltered, his ankle twisting under him as the man darted forward. Tristan found himself forced back, fending off a series of quick jabs that left him little room to maneuver. His ankle gave out and he fell to his knees, barely able to deflect the invader’s blade.

Bors entered the melee with a throaty roar, inserting himself between Tristan and his attacker. Bors swung, and his axe shattered the man’s skull. As the assailant dropped, blood and brains running down what remained of his skull, Tristan scrambled upward, limping toward the stables. He fell against the overturned wagon, trying to shoulder it aside. Lancelot joined him a moment later, sharing in Tristan’s urgency as they worked to unbar the door.

Not enough, it’s not enough.

“Bors!” Tristan screamed, his voice nearly lost in the chaos.

The older knight turned, attuned to the familiar—if exceedingly rare—sound of Tristan's pleas for help. Bors threw himself bodily against the wagon, the cart finally moving under their combined strength. When they'd pushed it far enough aside to open one of the doors, Tristan gripped the handle without thinking, his palm blistering instantly on the heated metal as he tugged.

Inside the barn, an inferno raged.

A wave of smoke pushed outward, caught in the breeze of the open doorway. Tristan stepped closer, gagging on the smell of burning meat as a load-bearing beam attached to the ceiling cracked and collapsed. Someone pulled Tristan back, tendrils of fire licking at the hay crushed under his boots. Deep within the barn, a horse shrieked in abject terror.

Tristan turned away, a similar scream perched against his lips.

Bedlam reigned as a swarm of enemy fighters breached an unsecured gate, streaming into the courtyard. Tristan lost himself to the fight, *the rage*. He killed indiscriminately, splattered blood sticky against his lips. The clash eventually faltered, Rome's soldiers cornered by a mass of armored men whose numbers only seemed to grow. Six knights remained, the rest of the outpost's resistance a handful of centurions and common laborers. Two cooks stood with them, as well the blacksmith's apprentice; just a boy still, but larger than Bors. The sounds of battle rang out from the far side of the compound, whoever still remained fighting to the bitter end.

The invaders advanced slowly, cautious but encouraged by the bloodlust running through their veins. Tristan spared a glance over his shoulder, finding Lancelot and Dag back and back, blades raised. To his right, Bors growled and spit blood, daring the nearest aggressor to step within range of his axe.

Tristan took a breath, then let it out. He tightened his grip on his sword.

Their last stand never came.

* * *

Tristan twisted against the ropes encircling his wrists, his fingers numb.

He'd aggravated an old injury in the fight, pain radiating up his forearm with every tug against the knotted vise. He clenched his jaw and took a breath. When the worst of the agony faded, he started again.

He'd been bound like this all morning, forced to his knees alongside his brothers. The knights had been separated from the rest of the Romans early on, taken from the surviving prisoners and led to a large tent erected on a hillside just outside of the burned outpost. A hoard of

guards watched over them, though they didn't speak to their captives. Tristan didn't need to hear their voices—hear that familiar, accented tongue—to understand what had happened. In the daylight, there was little hiding who their enemies were now, or where they'd come from.

Reus.

The city of gold. Prodigal brother to Rome.

Tristan had been to Reus only once, back when a fragile peace had overtaken both nations. Relations had soured over the decades, for reasons he'd never much cared to ruminate on. He was meant to serve his time in Britain—had done just that, for the last ten years of his life. If war with Reus was destined, let it be some other auxiliary to take up the sword. Yet, somehow, here he and his brothers kneeled, prisoners of a Reusian army, their fates about to change once more.

Footsteps approached from behind the line of knights, but the rumble of Reusian chatter that followed told Tristan this was to be no rescue. A line of men were lead inside, their clothes ragged and bloody. Tristan didn't turn, but from the corner of his eye watched the parade of outpost survivors pulled to stand before them. He recognized most of the higher ranking Roman soldiers; some by name, others by reputation only. Arthur came next, hands unbound out of courtesy, but clearly just as trapped as the rest of them. His gaze fell across the group before him, counting the living and silently mourning the dead.

The new prisoners were pushed to their knees opposite Tristan's meager band.

Gawain's blond hair was pink with blood, his shirt torn across the shoulder from a laceration that looked to still be bleeding heavily. Galahad had fared better, though soot covered his cheeks and a thin trail of blood ran down his temple from a cut along his hairline. The tight, quiet rage contained on Galahad's face wavered as his eyes flickered upon Tristan.

Tristan forgot how to breathe, so elated at the sight. Yet even with the undeniable truth before him—Galahad alive and mostly unscathed; unbroken by their defeat—every instinct he possessed was awash in dread. It was a bitter condolence, knowing either of them had survived. Better to die in battle than whatever *this* was. A group execution, no doubt. Fast and merciless, with no honor to be found in their deaths. It was both a salve and a burn at the same time, for Tristan, knowing he wouldn't die alone.

An armored man entered the tent, tall and broad shouldered. He was older than most of the Reusian soldiers in the room, dark hair graying at the temples. A man in his prime, who had seen war his entire life. The guards all straightened and dipped their chins in deference.

The man watched the prisoners with weary disregard as he neared. He stood chest to chest with Arthur, his golden breastplate as blood-splattered as his Roman counterpart.

"The great Arthur—an honor," he said, doing little to hide the smirk that broke across his face. "My name is Commander Feris."

"You've traveled a long way to make war with Rome," Arthur murmured, his body seemingly held upright by spite alone.

The commander laughed, drawing closer. “Rome has already declared war. I’m simply the first wave of retaliation. Your people will recoil in terror when they hear the news of your defeat. A fabled legion lost, alongside any legitimate claim to this godsforsaken isle.”

Arthur glared, though Feris seemed unbothered by his silence.

“You’ll make a fine prize for my people. When we ransom you back to Rome, tales will be told of the whore we found in your bed. Of how you hid in a back pantry when we arrived, your cock still dripping.”

Tristan felt someone shift next to him, straining to get closer to Feris.

“Silence your vile tongue,” Lancelot snarled.

The guards stepped forward but Feris waved them off, eyeing Lancelot with a tilt of his head. “Are you his wet nurse?” he asked, crouching before the knight. “Or perhaps you’re the whore?”

Lancelot bristled in anger, but Feris grabbed him by the back of his hair, exposing his neck. The Reusian wrapped his other hand around the front of Lancelot’s thigh, his thumb digging into an open wound. Lancelot grunted, holding back a scream.

Arthur stepped forward, but two guards took his arms.

“You think I don’t know who you are? My spies have told me all I need to know of you and your Sarmatians. Arthur and his band of Roman slaves, keeping the Woad’s stick army at bay.”

“Yet we’ve heard nothing of *your* reputation,” Lancelot murmured, voice low. “A great Reusian warrior with no glory to speak of—how utterly *tragic*.”

The commander laughed, his hand tightening in Lancelot’s dark hair. “Aye? And what would you know of *reputation*? I'm told you're quite the lover. Perhaps you could put those skills to good use in our brothels. Maybe I should throw you to my men this very evening?”

Lancelot twisted against the hold, but said nothing.

"Or,” Feris considered, pulling the knight closer, his face a breath away from Lancelot’s own. “Perhaps I’ll simply make you *mine*.”

The commander’s grip on Lancelot’s thigh tightened, and the knight let out a choked whimper.

“Stop!”

Tristan’s heart froze at the sound.

Galahad stumbled to his feet, throwing himself at the commander.

Though Feris was larger by far—Tristan's height, perhaps, though stockier—Galahad had caught him unaware, too focused on tormenting Lancelot to realize the danger that kneeled next to him. They collided in a tangle of limbs, toppling to the floor. Tristan watched as Galahad's fingers brushed the dagger hanging at Feris' hip, reaching to no avail as the startled guards moved in to roughly pull him away.

One of the men backhanded Galahad, re-opening the wound on his forehead as he fell in a heap between the two rows of knights. Chaos broke loose, the knights spurred to action as they staggered to their feet, their movements quick but hampered by their bindings. The uprising lasted no more than a few seconds, however, a curved sword pressed to Arthur's throat instantly halting their movements. The knights were forced back down, and Feris came to stand before Galahad, wiping blood from his lip. He bent, taking Galahad by the neck, his grip encircling the younger man's neck as he pulled him to his feet.

"A foolish endeavor, for one so winsome," he said, drawing Galahad closer.

Galahad thrashed, his hands wrapping around Feris' wrists. His words were choked, barely audible, though they reverberated clearly through the silent room: "Fuck me instead."

The knights stared at one another, then at Galahad, as if uncertain of what they'd all just heard. Tristan had heard though—and he wished to the gods he hadn't.

"Is that so, boy?" Feris asked, relaxing his grip on Galahad's throat.

Galahad stretched himself as tall as he could, straining toward the Reusian. His voice lowered, his words slow and pointed. "Take me in his stead. Use me. In all of your briefings, did your spy never inform you of *my* reputation amongst the knights?"

"No!"

The exclamation had come from Gawain, who was pulling against the Reusian hands holding him back. "You shut your fucking mouth right now, Galahad! Stop this!"

Galahad ignored him, his gaze locked upon Feris.

"Fuck me instead," Galahad whispered.

No.

Feris smiled, his confusion morphing into unbridled curiosity. The offer was simply too tempting.

Galahad the Pure, ready and ripe for the taking.

Around the room the knights began to struggle again, writhing against the guards holding them down. There would be no victory here, Tristan knew. No escape this time. Their numbers were too diminished, their enemy too cunning. His brothers knew this as well. And yet the prospect of what Galahad was offering was simply too horrific to bear.

As the others fought, Tristan remained still.

His reaction would only help to seal Galahad's fate.

Their fierce retaliation—the truth of it all—would only make the commander's decision easier. He looked upon Galahad as many did: a beautiful youth, out of place in such a scarred world of dirt and blood and piss. But he was wrong.

Galahad had always been their youngest; their brightspot. Fierce in his stubbornness, hardheaded to a fault. The boy who still lamented every life he took, though his sword never wavered when the time for battle came. His nickname, Galahad the Pure, had been born out of teasing, of long nights spent together on campaign. Not from some preposterous concept of chastity, but purity of heart. Galahad's goodness was a lodestone, a constant reminder of who they were, and who they could be. Not the killers they had become, but decent men; those who might one day be welcomed home by their people.

A litany of threats filled the tent, alongside their struggle. Never to be outdone, Bors screamed at the men holding him, spit-filled curses of every Sarmatian expletive he knew. The blunt corner of a shield found the back of Bor's neck, dropping him quickly, yet still he resisted.

Lancelot pulled himself upright, horror writ across his features as he raised his palms upward, still tied around the wrist. "Galahad no, this isn't…"

"Enough!" the commander bellowed, pressing his dagger to Galahad's throat.

A hush fell across the room, nervous energy on both sides.

The commander leaned forward, taking Galahad's chin between his fingers and forcing the younger man to meet his gaze. The edge of the dagger dragged upward, though it didn't break the skin. "I can take what I want, boy. Your words are meaningless. You can't give me anything I cannot already claim by force."

Galahad swallowed, tilting his head as far as the unwelcome grip on his face would allow. The corner of his mouth lifted, innocent and seductive and so, so very young. "I would not struggle; I would be yours. Why fight for what can be—" Galahad paused, smile deepening as he chose his final words, "—freely given?"

The commander said nothing, eyes locked upon the knight before him. A long moment passed, his interest in Galahad only growing.

No. Gods no.

A laugh forced its way out of Feris' chest, a throaty exclamation of exasperation. Galahad's defiance, even disguised as passivity, clearly intrigued him. Taking the dagger from Galahad's throat, the commander pushed him into the arms of one of the nearest guards.

"Take him to the encampment, make sure he's secured." Feris looked down at Lancelot, a fleeting glimpse of indecision crossing his face before adding, "And take this one as well."

* * *

Galahad paced Feris' tent, his bare feet wearing a path through the lush fabric that covered the dusty ground below.

He'd been locked away for nearly two days, bathed and fed, but isolated; the sound of his brother's voices just a distant echo now. He knew he'd made the right decision, the *only* decision in that moment that had made any godsdamn sense, but their looks of disappointment, of anger, haunted him still. He hadn't planned it, hadn't thought before opening his mouth. They would have done the same for him, in their own way.

But this—this could do for them.

Galahad had always been aware of the way people looked at him, long before he'd understood the implications of those stares. At the Roman garrison where he'd trained as a boy, he'd left behind a series of black eyes amongst the older children, their daily taunts about his *beauty* focusing his anger. The teachers at the garrison had been no different, and Galahad, even at nine years old, had made a habit of keeping away from those who fostered certain reputations within the conclave. Their archery instructor had taken an obsessive glean to him early on, an unwanted favoritism the other boys hadn't missed. Galahad had stomached the extra touches, the casual brushes, as the man had taught him how to angle his stance or thread his bow.

After a particularly long lesson one morning, Galahad had remained behind to clean at his instructor's behest. The man had left a short time later, called to meet with the garrison's commander. Galahad had notched an arrow, watching the man as he'd turned his back to cross the courtyard. He'd followed the man, his bow shifting with every movement, and when he'd fired it was only after pivoting left, sending the arrow straight into their practice dummy's straw heart.

Galahad hadn't noticed the older boy watching, but when a hand had touched his shoulder—when a quiet voice had complicated his *form*—Galahad had reacted poorly. In blind panic, he'd turned and hit the other boy across the face, sending him sprawling into the dirt. The compliment had been innocent, in hindsight. Free of innuendo or malice, though clearly delighted by what he'd just seen Galahad openly contemplate.

But Galahad hadn't been able to bottle the rage that had finally boiled over that day.

From the ground, Tristan had remained silent. He'd squinted in pain, running a sleeve under his broken nose to stem the blood as Galahad had stood over him, his fists clenched with unbridled fury, tears threatening to spill down his cheeks. Galahad hadn't cared what happened next; hadn't cared that he'd just hit the quiet outsider who everyone spoke about in whispers. Who was, he only realized in that moment, five years older and twice Galahad's size. Tensing for a fight he could never win, Galahad had watched Tristan stand, blood caked

around his upper lip. Dots of red had splashed the dirt below their feet as Tristan gazed at him, then turned away, passing Galahad without a word as he left the courtyard.

Two days later, their archery instructor had been trampled during a training mission after two of his leather saddle straps had snapped, sending him tumbling under his horse's hooves. Alive, though unlikely to ever walk again, the other trainers had used the accident as an example of the importance of maintaining one's riding kit.

Your safety is paramount, they'd said, sending the boys off to clean the stables.

At their next archery lesson, Tristan had materialized by Galahad's side, silent as morning mist. They didn't speak of their former teacher, then or ever again. A month later they'd been swept away, chosen by Arthur to live new lives, to form new bonds. To find a patchwork family that might someday ease the ache of missing their own.

That was over now, washed away by treachery and blood.

Mordred had betrayed them. The knight had been providing intelligence to the Reusians for years, intent not only on gaining his freedom from Rome, but seeking a monetary windfall worth his disloyalty. He'd ridden away earlier that morning, his back to the people he'd sworn to protect. They hadn't been close—Mordred had always preferred the company of Lamorak and Geraint, the older boys in the group—but they'd trained together, fought together.

Galahad stopped his pacing, frozen at the sight of the commander's lavish bed, three times the size of his meager cot. He thought of the room he'd shared with Bedivere; of seeing them burn his body a day prior in a mass interment. Mordred had been fond of Bedivere, that Galahad was certain of. And he had let him die. He'd been willing to let them *all* die.

A rustling at the door drew Galahad's attention, and he watched warily as the Reusian commander entered the personal tent. A servant in dark robes trailed him, the heavy curtain swinging shut behind them. The servant scrutinized Galahad, his face tight with displeasure though he said nothing as he followed his master. Feris ignored them both, striding toward a stand lined with fresh food and drink. A pitcher of wine awaited, and Feris poured himself a chalice, drinking deeply. He set the cup down and then ran his hands through a basin of clean water, scrubbing the dust from his palms.

He turned, wiping his fingers against the servant's robes.

Feris spread his arms and the man began to unlatch the commander's armor, removing the hulking chest plate and placing it on a waiting stand. His gauntlets and chainmail came next, followed by his back plates and boots. Unburdened, Feris waved the servant out, returning to the wine and bread. When he was sated, he turned and shed his upper tunic, clad now in only light breeches.

Minutes had passed without a word, as if Galahad were invisible to him.

Feris washed his face, running a cloth over his brow and around his neck. He poured more wine, filling another chalice. Swirling the drink, he took a final sip and placed the glass back

onto the table. He turned to the bed, sitting at the edge of the mattress.

“Is this the seduction you promised me, boy? All the way across the room?”

Galahad swallowed.

“Do you think me some Saxon brute?”

When Galahad refused to respond, Feris smiled wryly.

“Ah, you do then? Some barbarian warrior come to pillage, to mindlessly kill with no higher warrior’s code such as yourself? Are your Romans really so different? I imagine the Woads slaughtered beyond the northern border of your compound see it differently.” Feris chuckled. “You may think me harsh, but this is war. Rome began this conflict, not my King. Come here.”

Galahad approached, suddenly aware of the chill in the room, the lightness of his tunic. He swallowed as Feris beckoned him forward, stopping where the other man’s legs parted against the bed. Even while sitting, Feris was only a few inches shorter than Galahad. He ran a hand through Galahad’s cropped hair, tugging lightly.

He leaned back, arms spread behind him. “Let me see you.”

A numb coldness took hold of Galahad as he raised his tunic over his head, his body bare beneath. He could do this. He *must* do this. In the quiet of the room, Galahad felt as if he could hear his own heartbeat, drumming against his chest.

He had chosen this.

Feris leaned closer, his lips curving into a smile. He rested his palms against Galahad’s slim hips, trailing his fingers slowly down and over his flank. Feris’ hands were not gentle, exactly, but nor were they harsh. Galahad hated him all the more for it.

“Is it true what they say about you, knight?”

When Galahad didn’t speak, his eyes lost to some corner of the room, Feris took Galahad’s chin between his fingers, tiling his head down.

“Are you *pure*?”

Galahad turned away, the burn coloring his cheeks real but his modesty a ruse. For as much as Bors and Lancelot enjoyed teasing him, Galahad was no more untouched than the rest of his brothers. He’d never wanted for companionship of any kind over the years, save for perhaps one.

“Take your hand off me.”

“Not until you listen.”

Galahad grew more anxious with every passing moment, the weight of his promises starting to smother him where he stood.

Feris laughed then, dropped his hand from Galahad's face as he rose from the bed. He returned to the stand of food and drink, taking a sip from his chalice to finish the wine already there, then filled the container with more wine. After searching a row of small phials, he came upon a muddy brown liquid, which he emptied into the wine. He swirled the contents, then returned to the bed, forcing the chalice into Galahad's hands.

When Galahad hesitated, Feris smirked.

"All this just to poison you now?"

Galahad acquiesced, drinking half and trying not to gag at the stale taste. A pointed look from Feris compelled him to finish the cup.

"What is it?" Galahad finally asked, grimacing at the bitterness that clung to his tongue.

"Something to relax you, nothing more."

"Why?"

Feris ran a hand down Galahad's arm, a gentle graze of flesh. Galahad tensed.

"That is why."

Galahad looked away, his eyes falling to the bed behind them as Feris continued the caress.

"Some men take pleasure in pain, but I've always enjoyed beautiful things. And you—you are exquisite. You made a pact, young knight. Will you break your bond when the lives of your comrades hang in the balance?"

His hands trailed downward, one resting against Galahad's hip as the other traced patterns on his chest before descending to take Galahad into his hand.

Galahad flinched at the touch, shame and anger and helplessness battling to free themselves from his chest in a great burst. He thought of running, of striking out as he'd been trained, and making for the treeline beyond the camp. One sword was all he needed, the guards likely tired from the late hour, already dozing off beyond the curtain.

He could leave it all behind.

But yet Galahad said nothing, did nothing. He moved as if in a fog as Feris guided him onto the bed, their bodies surrounded by a pile of furs and lavish silk. He felt as if he were dreaming, the alcohol in his empty stomach making him lightheaded while the tonic worked to ease the chaos of his mind.

He could run, but he would not.

Lips found his throat, his mouth, the touch unfamiliar and hard. He didn't return the kiss, but he submitted to it. Pulled forward, Galahad found himself straddling Feris' bare thighs, dizzy from the way his head hung low over the man's chest. Their bodies pressed together as Feris devoured his mouth, rough hands coming around to squeeze at his flank and pull him closer, tighter.

Galahad felt his body's mindless reaction to the touches, tinted by thoughts of another time, another person beneath him. He banished the image from his mind, unwilling to tarnish such a memory with this… this moment.

Feris' hardness pressed into his stomach, the realization of what was about to happen bouncing lazily around Galahad's thoughts as hands gripped at his waist, pressing him farther down against the heat that lay between them. Feris panted heavily into his neck, mouthing at the space behind his ear as his hips shuddered against Galahad's own. Galahad's dazed mind feared what came next, waited for the pain, but Feris didn't seem interested in anything but the glide of their bodies, slickened by something that smelled of rosewater and sweet susinum oil.

Galahad felt himself begin to tremble, his skin too sensitive.

Shadows ate at him, his mind comprehending little now save the feeling of *wrongness* that washed through him as his body finally released, base pleasure mixed with a sudden crushing dread.

He had chosen this.

This was his choice.

Galahad sagged, but his body continue to move—to be moved—by the large hands holding his hips. The grip tightened, pulling him down and then up again, over and over until the motion made him feel like he was adrift on the ocean. Beneath him Feris pulsed and stilled, his warm release coating Galahad's stomach. Heavy breaths filled Galahad's ear, the hands holding him finally slipping from his waist.

When darkness took him, he welcomed it with open arms.

* * *

(-later-)

Tristan entered the tent in chains.

Bound wrist and ankle, the manacles allowed him little movement as he was forced through the doorway, shuffling to the center of the room before being pushed to his knees. The Reusian guards who had chained him had left nothing to chance, their restraints providing Tristan no opportunity to approach their commander without their consent. Before leaving, they attached a final chain, running it from the cuffs on his ankles to a collar encircling his neck, keeping him even further immobilized. He watched them depart, his back straight but slightly bowed. *Just enough to hurt.*

The tent smelled of incense and susinum oil, and behind that, the fading musk of copulation. Early morning sunlight had begun to seep through the cracks in the canvas door, but the room was still dim, a bench of candles near the bed the tent's only real illumination. Feris stood at a basin washing his face, rivulets of water running down his chin as he scrubbed at his cheeks. He wore soft breaches and a robe to keep away the early morning chill, but little else.

Tristan paid him no mind, his gaze focused on the room's other occupant.

Galahad lay sleeping on an oversized pallet, a pile of dark furs beneath his body. He was nude, pale legs spread in an untroubled sprawl, his lean torso tangled in a thin silk blanket. Tristan watched the slow rise and fall of Galahad's chest, the calm features of an unnatural slumber.

From across the room, Feris dropped a cloth into the basin with a splash. With his back still turned, he spoke to Tristan.

"I won't waste your time, nor mine, by pretending we both don't why I brought *you* here and not Arthur. I want you to stop the insurrection you and your knights have planned."

Tristan refused to take his eyes from Galahad as Feris approached. The Reusian commander stayed out of his reach, as if wary that, even whilst bound, Tristan might be able to cover the distance and tear his throat out.

Feris was no fool then.

Such cunning would have impressed Tristan, had their situation been different. Had their lives intersected in some other way.

"I saw you the day of your capture, watched you kill dozens of my men without pause, without a grain of mercy. I also saw your restraint, when Galahad offered himself to me freely. Some men might have mistaken it for apathy, but I saw the look in your eyes. I knew it then, just as I know it now. More than the others, you would do whatever is required to keep him safe."

Feris turned and walked around the bed, standing beside Galahad's prone form. He gazed upon Galahad a long moment, then back at Tristan. "I think you understand, do you not?" he asked, sinking to sit at the edge of the bedding.

The back of Feris' knuckles grazed Galahad's cheek, his brow. Galahad seemed aware of the sensation; the slightest tilt of his head toward the caress his only movement, but he didn't fully wake. For that fact, Tristan was grateful.

Feris' hand dipped lower, across Galahad's chest and lower still. His thumb caught at the blanket cloaking Galahad's hips and he dragged it aside, exposing the younger man's body to the chill of the room. He traced an idle finger around Galahad's navel, then down to his soft cock; light caresses that spurred a lethargic reaction from the knight. Galahad shifted, his eyes still closed but his body mindlessly leaning into the touch as Feris took Galahad into his hand and began to stroke him.

The chains holding Tristan creaked, his shoulders raked with pain. His hands were numb, the skin around his wrists worn through.

On the bed Galahad writhed sluggishly, caught between some moment of insentient pleasure and pain, his breath quickening with each dry pull.

"You will go back to your Sarmatians and tell them to accept the fate I have offered," Feris continued, his eyes never leaving Tristan. "You are all more useful to me alive than dead, but my leniency is not a promise. Stop this rebellion before it starts. It will only cause pain."

His fist tightened and Galahad whimpered.

Tristan shifted, giving Feris the satisfaction of witnessing his rage. He needed Feris to see, *to understand*. To know that after everything—the slaughter of good men, the bringing of ruin upon their lives—the fall of the outpost wouldn't be the reason Tristan killed him.

No, it would be for this moment, and this moment alone.

Feris watched him, the recognition between them clear, though it didn't stay his hand. On the bed Galahad's weak pants grew louder. He didn't last long—Feris' touch too meticulous, too intentioned. When Galahad was finally spent, pearl streaks lashed across his torso, Feris wiped his hand against one of the furs and then called to his guards.

Pulling Tristan to his feet, they removed him from the tent.

It was the last time he would see Galahad in this life.

* * *

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> About Apples: Once upon a time, someone wrote a Trishad story about an apple orchard and it has been stuck in my fanon brain ever since. I don't know who you are, but [Liam Neeson voice] I thank you.

* * *

(-before-)

Why is it always the godsdamn cocks.

Galahad sighed, tugging Bedivere away from his ear as the drunken man began to bellow yet another Roman drinking song.

It was the third time Galahad had heard that particular ballad from Bedivere tonight. Even now, only halfway across the anterior courtyard, the inebriated knight had repeated the chorus a half-dozen times, his voice somehow louder upon each new rendition. Bedivere didn't seem to recall the rest of the lyrics, and Galahad was grateful. He'd never bothered to learn more than half of the song himself. The only section he ever remembered—what *anyone* ever remembered—were the verses about the hydra growing four new cockheads.

Galahad would never be able to fathom why the Romans so enjoyed a metaphor about cutting off one’s own manhood, but sing it proudly they did. He suspected they garnered no actual meaning from it either, save the besotted pleasure of rhyming far too excitedly about the male anatomy.

The other knight was heavy, and Galahad grunted in exertion as Bedivere tried to stagger away. They reached the barn and Galahad kicked at one of the cracked doors, widening it enough to drag Bedivere inside and deposit his brother in the first clean stall he could find. The horses didn't stir, exhausted but happy to be back where buckets of fresh food were ever plentiful. Bedivere murmured another few verses and then fell into a doze, snoring heavily against the hay.

Galahad twisted his back from side to side, easing the strain. If he was lucky, Bedivere would sleep for a few hours and then, possibly, be sober enough for Galahad to haul him back to their room. If not, the hay would have to suffice for the night.

Galahad stopped at the threshold of the barn, deciding if he felt like continuing with the festivities. He hadn't had much enthusiasm for their return, other than the welcome thought of once again sleeping in a bed that wasn't made of knotted roots. There was a simplicity while on campaign; a focus on the mission, with little else to serve as distraction. At the output, the daily bastion of domesticity was hard to escape. They trained and they ate and they fucked, and when the time came they fought, traversing the wilds of Britain. But they always returned; the cycle beginning anew. So ensnared by Rome's politics—Rome's *ambitions*—there were times it was easy to forget his life hadn't always been this way. He'd now lived as a Roman slave longer than he'd ever lived on Sarmatian soil. A decade of his life taken from him with no recourse but to continue down a path dictated for him by others. It would be hard to remember his homeland at all, at times, were it not for the oldest amongst his brothers.

And yet he still wished to return to his people, should he somehow survive this godsforsaken isle. Even as a stranger.

Even if it meant going alone.

Galahad exhaled heavily.

A torch flickered across the yard, the flame dancing against a light wind. He walked toward it, pebbles crunching softly under his boots. He knew he was being watched; had been for most of the day since he'd returned, but his shadow refused to reveal himself, and Galahad hadn't yet had the fortitude to call out.

He approached the courtyard's peristyle, eyeing the shadows above where the two support walls converged underneath the outcropping. He didn't say anything, simply sat against the sandstone wall and let himself sink down to sit on the ground, knees to his chest. Someone had once taught him that prediction was easy, if one knew what to watch for. Or listen for, in this case. Ghosts were silent, but men wore boots that crushed the rocks below them and bronze loops that shifted against the leather of their belts.

"Are you to run again?" Galahad asked, not expecting a reply.

Tristan didn't act surprised that Galahad had found his hiding place.

Bastard.

Perhaps if he made him angry, Tristan would skulk back into the darkness again and let Galahad return to normal. The knights would reintegrate to life at the output, while he and Tristan avoided each other for another few days. They'd spar upon Lancelot's order, because he always had an uncanny knack for getting what he—and by proxy, Arthur—wanted. Unity and loyalty above all else. Over time, it would go back to what it had been, or something close. That would have to be good enough.

But Tristan rarely did what Galahad wanted, and he appeared from the shadows like a wrath summoned home. He looked well, or at least well enough to Galahad's eyes. His wrist was no longer bound, the injury that had kept him from their northern campaign already healed.

Tristan watched Galahad carefully, then scratched at the back of his neck. “You've grown out your hair.”

Galahad smiled, his neutral expression destroyed by those uninvited words. Leave it to Tristan to observe what he least wanted him to. He ran a hand over his hair, short against the sides still but growing at the top. It wasn't long enough to curl quite yet, still half a year or more away from the wavy russet locks he'd once had as a child. He'd come to Rome with a shaggy nest of long hair, as was custom amongst his tribe. It had taken only a few days to realize it was drawing attention he didn't need. Galahad had shorn it the first moment he could, and he'd kept it that way ever since. He'd been gripped for so long with worry about it growing again, he'd somehow forgotten he was no longer a boy in need of protection.

“Next you'll be commenting on my beard.”

“It's a bit long, yes. But I wasn't going to say anything.”

The stubble was indeed longer than usual, but it would be gone soon, now that Galahad had the outpost’s *tonstrina* available to him again. Dag had a steady hand, but the old barber’s blade was more precise than anything available in the wild. Fewer nicks too, though Dag always tried his best.

A cheer rose up from the other side of the wall, the celebration still going strong in the main courtyard even at the late hour. The lilting melody of a song floated into the air, a dozen voices strong. It carried no tune other than inebriated happiness.

In the near-dark above him, Tristan chuffed.

After a hesitation that Galahad felt more than saw, the older knight settled himself against the wall and sat. He moved slowly, as if afraid Galahad would bolt from the spot, or hit him. Or perhaps both. Galahad did neither, simply pressed his head back against the stone and took in the ballad, humming the last part.

“I've always abhorred this song,” Tristan groused, his tone dour. “Only the Romans would think it funny to cut off a perfectly good cock just to have four smaller ones grow back.”

Galahad snickered, the flare of joy so unexpected it sent him into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. Tears filled his eyes, his chest heaving. Whether it was exhaustion or the cask of ale he'd shared with Bedivere, Tristan’s declaration was the funniest godsdamed thing he had heard in months. His jollity must have been infectious, for soon Tristan was laughing as well, his hand clutching his torso as if he were trying to keep it still by sheer force of will. Side by side they sat for several minutes, long past the song’s closure, wheezed breaths hitching in and out.

Galahad wiped at an escaped tear, finally calming enough to sit up. He sniffed, swiping at the other side of his face. Next to him, Tristan sighed, a deep exhalation that spoke of more than just mirth.

“I'm sorry,” Tristan finally said, turning his face to Galahad in the dark. “I never intended to hurt you. You must know that?”

Galahad looked down at his knuckles, bruised from weeks of hard travel. “I'm able to forget many things Tristan, but not that. I can only promise, perhaps with time, we can go back to where we were.”

“That is not what I want.”

“Then you shouldn't have left when…” Galahad stopped, the words stuck in his throat. He took a breath, then another. “I'm many things, but a whore isn't one of them.”

Tristan looked stricken.

“What? How could you believe I'd ever think such a thing?”

“How am I to know what you think, or desire? You were as silent as the grave in the weeks before we left on campaign. If it weren't for the squawk of your damn bird in the tower, I would've believed you vanished. Now you've avoided me, from the moment I stepped foot again under the garrison arches. So, yes, that's what I think.”

“Galahad, you must believe me, I don't know where…”

“Is it forgiveness you want, Tristan? Can I absolve you of your cruelty?”

“Galahad…”

“What do you want me from me!” Galahad hissed, anger burning through his chest like an inferno. Tristan was so often a man of few words, yet now he couldn't seem to shut up. “Must I bed you to convince you to leave me alone? One good fuck, so you can free yourself of this obsession?”

He forced himself upward, stumbling back against the wall in his hast. Tristan grabbed his wrist like an iron brace, holding him in place, and Galahad knew this wouldn't end well for either of them tonight.

“Take your hand off me.”

Tristan stood, his grip firm. “Not until you listen.”

“I heard what you said that night, Tristan. *I heard it*. And then you had the gall to ignore me for days afterward, like I wasn't even worth your time. I'm entitled to my anger.”

He could still remember the shadows of that evening, seeping over the walls of the auxiliary fort as he'd neared the terse murmuring of two familiar voices. He'd only meant to speak with Tristan, after a long night of silence. But as he had approached, out of sight amongst the thick canvas of the tents, all he'd heard was the acerbic cadence of Tristan’s voice, speaking of Galahad as if he were a thing to be owned, to be *given*. He hadn't stayed to confront him—his feelings too raw, the day too complicated. Perhaps he should have.

Now, he wished to not think of that night in any capacity.

“What you heard was not… I can explain. *Please*.” Tristan stood, still holding Galahad’s wrist like he would the reigns of an unwieldy beast.

Galahad’s punch landed as intended, an unexpected blow across Tristan’s jaw that sent him backward into the dirt. Finally free of Tristan's intrusive grip, Galahad's fists tightened, waiting for the retaliation he knew was coming. They were no longer children; Tristan wouldn't be lenient a second time.

Yet Tristan remained sprawled on the ground, the blow not coordinated enough to do much but leave him dazed. There was no blood, only a growing redness across his jaw, but he looked at Galahad in shock. It immobilized him, for a moment, though he knew Tristan had no right to appear so hurt. As if Galahad had started them down this path. It was Tristan who had thought he had some right to Galahad, who could touch him and then abandon him, as if it had meant nothing. As if *he* were nothing. If his worth was so little, then so be it, but he wouldn't give Tristan the satisfaction of knowing how deeply it bothered him. Galahad shifted in hesitation, then turned away. He brushed a hand quickly across his cheek, wiping away tears of a different kind now.

He went back to the barn to check on Bedivere.

Tristan didn't follow.

* * *

(-now-)

Feris’ rage was like a rockslide, an encompassing, unstoppable force not quelled by reason or man-made intervention. It simply rolled forward and then, inevitably, stopped as its momentum failed.

Galahad had watched the argument from outside the circle of men, his hands clutched loosely behind his back. The Reusian soldier who'd dared contradict his leader so brazenly now stood cowed before him, swallowing his fear as he waited for his dismissal. There was no violence to be had—or at least not thoughtless violence. The Reusians were not unlike the Romans in that sense, their rules of military discipline just as strict, if not more so due to the fact they cared little for social hierarchy within their ranks. A soldier from a rich family was treated no differently than a poor one. A man’s ability to fight, to take initiative, was a far more sought-after trait than the ability to wield political influence.

When Feris finally waved the man away, the soldier offered a shaky bow and disappeared back into the bustling encampment. The commander watched his departure with a hooded gaze, and Galahad knew that there would be consequences for the slight. Not today, perhaps, but Feris was not one to be crossed so publicly. He was a strong leader, a fearless fighter and shrewd tactician, but proud to a fault. He valued loyalty, above all other traits a man could possess.

If his subordinates were aware of Feris' ire, they made no mention of it, simply continued with their discussion as they detailed their progress on the camp's dismantlement. It was galling work, managing a war. In the weeks that Galahad had shared Feris' tent, he'd been privy to all the petty mundanities of military life he'd so often avoided. Watching the Reusian commander maneuver troops and allocate provisions, Galahad found he didn't envy him in that regard.

Arthur had always done his best to keep politics away from them, well aware that men destined to die for a cause not their own did not enjoy being reminded of their insignificance. Open in most ways with regards to strategy, or his own personal frustrations, Arthur had nevertheless preferred to keep the trivialities of statecraft between himself and his Roman counterparts. By the inherent nature of their servitude, the Sarmatians had cared little for questions; the whys never matted, simply the deeds that followed. Over the years, as their numbers had dwindled, they'd come to see why the bargain their kinsmen had struck with Rome was a life sentence for most.

Reus, when they arrived, would not be any different.

The Reusian scouts had left at dawn the day before, the withdrawal from Britain already in motion. Galahad had nothing to do now but wait and keep Feris content. He wasn't allowed out of the camp unattended, nor permitted to travel far from the tent he now called home. Even when given the chance to leave, most days Galahad preferred to stay inside, hidden away from prying eyes. Feris was too busy to lord him like a pet, but the Reusian soldiers nevertheless watched him with a contrasting assortment of emotions: anger and lust, indifference and impatience.

He'd seen only a few of his brothers in passing. Arthur mainly, but Lancelot twice, as he was being kept under special guard near Feris' tent. He didn't look ill-treated, for which Galahad was thankful. Feris had kept his promises thus far.

He'd seen Gawain as well, at a distance once. The other knight had stopped short when he'd noticed Galahad, tugging against the two guards escorting him. Galahad had felt the sharp burn of Gawain's confused stare as he'd turned his back on his friend. Time after time, he'd remained quiet in their presence, knowing his interactions with them would only cause more pain. They always tried to speak with him, asking him in silent looks and gestures if he was well; but he ignored their questions, their *pity*. Every moment he saw them was agony, their faces growing more and more despondent. He knew that if he looked at them for more than a passing moment—let them really see him—they'd know what he'd done in the name of their safety. *What he would do again.*

There'd been no sign of Tristan, not since the morning he'd offered himself to Feris, but he'd dreamt of him once, a hazy reminiscence born out of those first few days of imprisonment. Tristan hadn't spoken to Galahad in the dream, but he'd felt his presence, hidden amid the oily darkness of his mind. They'd parted on unpleasant terms, a regret that had only grown stronger as their separation loomed.

In his desperation, Galahad had found himself taking Feris' tonic when he could, slipping drops of the mixture into his drink throughout the daylight hours. By the time darkness fell, he always felt as if he were drifting upward, high above the madness.

When word of a ceasefire eventually spread, Galahad had hoped for an end to their torment. That perhaps, gods willing, he and the others would one day look back at this time as nothing more than a dark memory. Feris had been furious upon hearing the news, of course, the Reusian messenger who'd arrived at the camp treated as though he'd come bearing news of a plague, not peace. The army was to return to Reus as soon as possible, the negotiations already in their early stages. As angry as he was, Feris had complied with the order from his king, their departure scheduled in two days time. Galahad had waited to hear news of the prisoners—of the future Reus and Rome had planned for them—but Feris had been tight-lipped about the orders, keeping Galahad away from any discussion with regards to their fate.

He'd asked once. And he'd learned to never ask again.

The days has pass quickly after that, busy but uneventful. Until today.

On the eve of their departure, a disturbance flared inside the internment tent. Galahad had watched a dozen Reusian solders rush inside, Feris close behind them. When the corpse of the blacksmith's young apprentice had been dragged out, a gaping wound in his side leaving little doubt to his survival, Galahad had found himself frozen in fear. He'd been ordered back to Feris' tent shortly afterward, left to sit alone as the hours passed with no news regarding his brothers.

When Feris retired for the night, he didn't speak to Galahad. He sat at his desk, writing notes in the margin of a terrain map as the candles burned low around them. Galahad asked no questions, sitting in silence on a lounger while he drank himself into a stupor, his hand shaky as he brought the glass to his lips.

"Your commander is causing trouble again," Feris finally said, their quiet stalemate broken by something other than the scratching of quill against parchment. He stood, closing the lid of his ink pot with a sharp *clank*. Though his tone was light, Galahad could sense the tension in his words. "I've worked hard to craft a fair ransom. Rome should take no issue with paying it. And yet he still protests."

Galahad didn't need to ask what Arthur wanted, for it was obvious. Freedom for his knights, as much as his own liberty. Perhaps more, as he knew how worthless they were to Rome.

Feris watched Galahad as he sat at the edge of his bed, removing his boots. "You know as well as I do he cannot pay the random for his men, though he would try to spin gold out of his own hair if he could. He believes he can convince his leaders; that somehow his valor will sway the fecklessness of Rome. What say you, *puer*? Can Arthur achieve it?"

Galahad swallowed, setting down the chalice. Feris knew the truth, as much as Galahad did. He simply wanted him to say it aloud.

"The Roman military won't bow to Arthur's whims."

Feris nodded, a tired smile breaking across his lips. The whimsy faded quickly, as his eyes drifted in thought. After a tense moment, he turned to Galahad. "Then he'll raise an army to lead himself—and that I cannot let happen."

Galahad felt as if a vise had been clamped over his chest.

Arthur had friends, admirers in the political circus who spoke highly of him, but the loyalties of Rome were ever shifting. They wouldn't waste Roman lives to save a group of Sarmatian men, even knights. There were hills teeming with more prospects. They had no need to shed more Roman blood. But there were other ways; men who were not bound to a military code. Arthur was a man of duty, yes, but not if it stood in the way of honor. He wouldn't leave them —that Galahad was sure.

And it would get him killed.

Feris shifted, tossing his boots to the side of the pallet. He began to strip his outer tunic, dropping it against the furs over the bed. The Reusian was too smart to outright slaughter Arthur, but he would have no qualms about ordering one of his most loyal men to see the job finished. Perhaps with poison, or some other subtle means that wouldn't inherently break their delicate parley with Rome.

Panic welled in Galahad. In the morning they'd leave for Reus, and Arthur would remain. Dead and buried in the same British soil they'd all so long wished to abandon.

He stood and moved across the tent, his gait steady. Feris watched him skeptically but allowed the approach.

Standing above him, Galahad swallowed. "He is not a threat to you."

Feris looked unmoved. "Is that so, *puer*? You've fought with him, you know how dangerous he is. I take no particular pleasure in ending his life, but Arthur threatens retaliation. I've shown him every courtesy, yet he forces my hand. He leaves me few solutions."

Galahad sank to his knees. His hands came to rest atop Feris' spread thighs, his grip deferential, pleading. He gazed upward, falling into an abyss he would never be able to claw his way back out of. They'd all made sacrifices in this life, choices regretted and regaled.

What was one more.

"There's another way."

* * *

(-before-)

On the last night of the Roman conclave, a boar had been spitted and shared amongst the guardsmen who'd accompanied their commanders to the auxiliary fort.

Tristan had instantly regretted returning to the fort that evening, but once he appeared, Arthur had insisted he stay. The knights had welcomed him with their usual banter—*Were the trees looking well tonight, brother*?—and he ignored their jests as he sat with them around the fire pit. A dozen or more tents surrounded them, canvas and pelts keeping the wind at bay as the soldiers feasted together. The meat was good, the wine more so. A special cask, better preserved than anything they'd been rationed the past week. He hadn't expected this to be their final night, though he was glad to know they'd soon take their leave.

An early rise would temper the festivity, but a centurias-worth of men had been trapped for nearly a week, the summit inadvertently running longer than scheduled. Bored, and missing the comforts of home, they reminisced about their lives, their families. Absent kith and kin, spread far and wide within Rome itself or her outer provinces. *Home* was a vague concept for most, the career soldiers spending the majority of their lives abroad. Some of the men around him were stationed toward the south of the British Isles, just as Arthur's men guarded the northern borders. Others came from beyond the sea, taking ships across the channel from the mainland. The only thing they shared was simple geography, their legions banished to the fringes of the Empire.

Tristan drank little, barely sober from an unwise overindulgence earlier in the day. He'd been reckless, the frustrations of the last few months finally boiling over like rotten milk. He hadn't wanted it to be like that. Galahad deserved better than some... *quarrel* in the woods.

He sighed, his head pounding.

Tristan was used to taking what he wanted, with no fear of the outcome. Only this time it might cost him Galahad.

Simply because he'd been jealous of a Roman stranger who'd smiled too widely, and too often, for his liking.

Galahad had already been in the courtyard when Tristan arrived that night, busy winning a knife toss against some of the younger Romans. He'd noticed Tristan right away, had even made as if to move closer, forgoing the competition. But when Tristan turned his back, planting himself at the edge of the campfire, he'd remained alone. Galahad hadn't joined him then, nor at all that night. When Tristan peered back some time later, Galahad had vanished.

Around the fire, stories of valor quickly turned to tales of personal injuries. Broken limbs, twisted and torn; scars that ran from groin to ankle. Lancelot and Gawain told a tandem tale of a particularly nasty battle with the Woads, the knights ensnared behind enemy lines for days. They were making it more interesting than it had actually been, but Tristan didn't interrupt, save to remind them he'd killed 32 that day, not 17. When their story finished, Lancelot had insisted it was time they all slept, for they'd be north bound at first light. He patted Tristan on the shoulder as he left, a little unsteady as he weaved through the tents. He wouldn't enjoy waking before the sun, that was for certain.

"Have you seen Galahad?" Tristan asked as Gawain rose next to him, arms stretching wide as he yawned.

Gawain shook his head, unconcerned.

“I imagine he slipped off with Caius somewhere,” he said. “For the second time tonight, I might add.”

Tristan hesitated, trying to read Gawain’s inflection, but there seemed to be no underlining meaning—nor judgement—in his words. They'd never much cared about what the others did in their free time, carnal or not. Fraternization wasn't banned, nor permissible; just as long as it didn't get in the way of their duties. With the lives they lived, friendship could be just as dangerous as fucking. Any reason to lose focus on a mission, to put the safety of one above the many, was a treacherous prospect.

“Oh?” he asked, tone careful.

Gawain grinned at that, chuckling while he straightened his jerkin.

“I found him out in the forest earlier, looking like he'd just had a revelation from Arthur’s Lord himself. We all knew it would happen eventually, the Roman wasn't exactly subtle. It'll be best for everyone to ease his own particular tensions in the coming weeks. Arthur's planning a scouting campaign north of the Wall after we return—we'll be gone for months.”

Gawain left for their camp outside the fort, abandoning Tristan to watch the fire alone as the remaining Romans also returned to their beds. He sat for a time, stoking the dying fire, so lost in thought he nearly missed the interloper's quiet steps behind him. He turned to catch a shadow moving across the tents, hoping for a brief moment Galahad had returned. Hopefully to talk, more likely to scowl—though he admittedly deserved the latter.

But the man who appeared from the darkness wasn’t Galahad

You definitely deserve this, Tristan thought, trying his best not flee in the opposite direction the moment the tall Roman caught sight of him. Instead, Tristan chewed heartily on a piece of gristly meat, thankful for the distraction as Caius neared and smiled in greeting. He sat on the bench, rubbing his hands near the flames.

“I imagine we're all looking forward to returning home,” Caius ventured. “For all the escapades of military life, home can be a simple pleasure.”

Tristan nodded, an acknowledgment only. He watched the fire burn, hoping that if he ignored him, the other man might simply vanish.

He did not.

“Your fellows have told us fascinating tales of Britain—of the Woads and their mystical powers,” Caius continued. “I hear it's bewitching. Sir Galahad mentioned there are wild apple orchards to the south of your outpost.”

Tristan looked up, eyes narrowing. “We planted them as children, yes.”

Caius smiled, tucking his hands into the furs that covered his uniform.

“I look forward to seeing it someday soon.”

“How so?” Tristan asked, detecting an eagerness he didn't like.

“I've heard word my commander wishes to join Arthur on a crusade in a few weeks. Galahad has offered to show me the orchard, time permitting.”

Tristan stood, tossing the remains of his dinner into the fire.

Caius hesitated, as if unsure how to proceed. “Have I offended you?”

“No,” Tristan murmured, stepping around the pit.

“Is it true then?” Caius asked, and Tristan tensed. “The way Galahad spoke of you, I assumed you were… well, I assumed. When you spent so little time amongst us this week, I thought perhaps I was wrong. If he's yours, I don't wish to squabble. But if he's not, or you might be so willing to share…”

Tristan turned, his gaze cold.

Caius smiled, indifferent to Tristan’s stare. “I don't know your Sarmatian customs. I've heard all manner of tales regarding your people—you drink draughts of horse blood to gain your strength, you hold great orgies under the waning moon. Pure drivel, I'm sure. Still, perhaps someday I'll be able to share my own tale of Sarmatian flexibility under the moon?”

The worst part of it all, Tristan knew, was that Caius would likely spread his gossip, whether or not Galahad had ever touched him. And there wasn't a single thing Tristan could do to stop it from happening.

Caius sighed, seemingly weary of their conversation.

"It's a simple matter,” he said, the voice of a man never denied what he wanted. “I desire him, as do you. There might be a compromise to be made, surely? I have money, if gold were to make your decision easier.”

“You think Galahad a trinket to be given away?”

Caius shrugged. “All men have their price, whether they're taking or receiving said price.”

“You're not worthy of a single shred of Galahad’s attention.”

“I believe I'll leave that up to Galahad to decide. Someday soon, I should hope. Perhaps even in an apple orchard—I know I'd enjoy that.”

Tristan stepped forward, the ashy embers of the fire landing atop his boots. Three steps, and he would break Caius’ face against the very bench he sat on.

Across the courtyard, Arthur and the other garrison leaders exited the meeting hall, shaking hands as they dispersed for the night. Caius noticed them as well, his smirk growing. He knew Tristan wouldn't attack him; not presently, anyway. Not if it meant disrespecting Arthur’s command so blatantly. Tristan seethed, the restlessness of the last few weeks taking its toll. Caius would do as all cowardly Romans did, saunter away with his tail between his

legs. If he thought, in a few weeks' time, he'd be able to direct such false charms toward Galahad and succeed, he was a fool. Caius wasn't the first to underestimate Galahad.

"Run home, Roman," Tristan said, his tone unbearably bright. "Go back to your command and tell your tales of the Sarmatian *whore* you didn't get to bed this night. That you will *never* bed."

Caius leered, his brows raised. He didn't speak, but Tristan could read his face plainly enough: *I don't need your permission to take what I want.*

Tristan stepped closer. As grown men, Galahad had never needed anyone to defend him, but Tristan—tonight, of all covetous nights—was just imprudent enough to try. "Galahad is *mine*, do you understand? You have no claim to him. You will *never* have any claim to him."

Caius stood, wiping the dust from his furs. He smiled then, his sharp features almost serpentine in the shadows of the dying firelight.

"I look forward to our next meeting," Caius said, his hand wrapped against his sword's hilt, though his tone was cheerful.

He backed away, toward Arthur's approaching group. Tristan watched him go.

When Caius and Arthur were both out of sight, Tristan slammed a fist into the bench before him. Unthinking, he hit it again, then again; repeated blows until the thin wood began to splinter under the strain. His wrist was already swelling by the time he finished, his entire hand numb.

He sat on the broken bench, waiting for the pain.

* * *

(-now-)

In the weeks since their capture, Tristan had grown used to the silence.

With Galahad and Lancelot gone, the remaining knights had spent their time confined within the prison tent. Provided enough nourishment to keep them alive, if far from hearty, they'd been herded like cattle by the guards who watched over them, feed and exorcised but never spoken to. Their injuries had been treated, rudimentary care by a surgeon who'd seen to them only once the Reusian wounded had been dealt with.

They'd all feared Gawain's gash would fester, the worst of their scars that day, but he'd healed quickly, though not entirely, still favoring his shoulder long after the abrasion had sealed. While the bruises from their battle had faded, their restlessness had only grown, the uncertainty of their futures rotting away at their souls. They'd all grown quiet, their

conversation stilted by the confining walls of the tent. Days of weary stillness finally taking its toll.

The knights shared their quarters with a small group of non-Romans, those who'd stayed to fight and survived. Most of the civilians not killed that morning had evaded the bloody chaos, escaping into the tunnels that lead to the moors beyond the outpost. Lyra and her children had been with them, they'd been told, news that Bors had been particularly grateful to hear.

Thoughts of rebellion had simmered during the first few days of capture, though their plans had been quickly quelled by the Reusian guards who'd been assigned to keep them secured and mostly silent. The uneasy peace, however, had been shattered that afternoon upon learning their fate: not death, but slavery.

Arthur and the other Roman soldiers would be ransomed back to their people, per the outline of the truce between Rome and Reus. The Sarmatians, not bound by the same rules of war due to their status as indentured slaves, were to be taken as bounty, same as the civilians. Arthur had been livid upon hearing the news, his riotous anger turned toward the Reusian commander who'd quickly dismissed him, uninterested in his demands. In all of his years of war, it was the first and only battle Arthur couldn't win.

For some in the tent, slavery was better than death, and death a better alternative to slavery. Death was the fortune preferred by the blacksmith's apprentice, who was inspired to make a bid for freedom when a guard turned his back to him. The boy's rebellion had lasted mere seconds, his body gored by a curved Reusian sword. As the guards inspected his limp body, Gawain glared bitterly at Tristan.

The knights had tried, days after their capture, to inspire an insurgence. While some of the Reusian army had left to scout the area, heavy rains had drenched the camp, hindering the Reusians as they scrambled to fortify their shelters. It might have worked, Tristan knew, their guards fewer in number and more distracted.

It was an opportunity that would not come again, and Tristan had spoken out against it, his words frightening the civilians back into submission.

"Congratulations," Gawain murmured, watching as the boy's corpse was dragged outside.

"It wouldn't have worked," Tristan said flatly.

Gawain shook his head. "Your cowardice knows no limits."

"Nor does your foolishness."

There wasn't much slack to the chains holding them, but it was enough for Gawain to strike, slamming a fist into Tristan's jaw. The others interceded, pulling him away before the guards could intervene, but Gawain struggled and kicked against those holding him, cursing at Tristan. It was only Arthur's commanding voice that eventually broke his frenzy.

Later that night, Arthur crouched next to Tristan as the others slept, a bowl of water held between his hands. A fire burned low near them as he dipped a rag into the bowl and pressed

it to Tristan's face, dabbing at the cut under his swollen cheek. He was still unbound, but even had he wanted to run—wanted to abandon them—there were still tents full of soldiers waiting outside, and a forest of Woads beyond that.

Arthur finished his ministrations, not speaking. Tristan didn't need the attention, as the wound had already stopped bleeding, but Arthur seemed to want the contact and Tristan wouldn't begrudge him that. With his back to their keepers, Arthur dipped the cloth into the bowl one last time and twisted it, drops of red staining the water.

"Whatever Gawain may say, I've never known you to capitulate," he said quietly. "When we spoke of escape weeks ago, you were committed to our cause."

Tristan refused to answer.

Arthur frowned, watching him carefully. He didn't look at Tristan with betrayal, as Gawain had, nor the anxious confusion shared by the rest of his brothers. He looked at Tristan with pity.

"I saw the change in you. From one day to the next, you were with us, and then… you were not."

Tristan shifted away, but Arthur caught him by the elbow.

"I can only guess at what transpired on the morning Feris' guards led you to his tent, but I think I understand enough. They will too, if you choose to tell them."

Tristan watched him a long moment, then shook his head.

I'm sorry.

Arthur's tethering grip tightened. "I will find you all," he whispered, pausing as his anger swelled. "I swear upon my own life. *I will find you all*."

For the first time in all their years together, Tristan found he couldn't meet Arthur's gaze. He watched his hands instead, a knot of worry growing in his stomach. "There are some promises that even Arthur Castus cannot keep."

The next day, there were no goodbyes.

Although they still had the journey to Reus ahead, the knights were separated into smaller groups, different sections of the army leaving in a variety of directions once they reached the shoreline. Tristan found himself alone for the first time in weeks, his chains somehow heavier, more oppressive, than before.

Days later, he heard the camp gossip: Feris had taken Arthur's right arm. A punishment for his rebellious disobedience, and an end to his military career. With the swing of his sword, Feris had made certain he and Arthur would never again meet on the field of battle.

Such targeted barbarity was not Reusian custom, so alike the Romans in vanity and ritual. They would kill a legion of men without question, but the rules of war had always dictated

civility amongst the elites when permittable. The Saxons, by comparison, took no prisoners, while the Visigoths warred with their own particular method of tortures. Taking a rival's arm as a means to end conflict was something Tristan had only heard stories of in his youth. An archaic practice built on narcissism, of controlling someone's destiny long after the heady days of war were over.

It was Sarmatian tradition.

Tristan choose not to dwell too deeply, or too long, on what that meant.

Time passed, a wash of nothing days spent in travel, in labor.

Tristan had always been a slave—he'd never forgotten that fact. Invisible shackles were still shackles, no matter how kindly Arthur had treated them in their time together. His round table, his equality with his knights, was just a myth as fantastical as the stories of gods and monsters perpetuated by the Romans. He was chained to a different master, a different set of rules. A new way of life. All he could do was watch and wait, bound no longer by the rules of civil Roman servitude, by the hope of some future pardon.

Now he would make his own freedom.

* * *

(-later-)

The serrated blade was beautiful, its handle inlaid with streaks of silver and white gems. It was a rich man's dagger, ornamental in design, ceremonial in nature, never meant to face the hardships of battle. *It's lovely*, Galahad thought, a moment before he slid the blade across the Reusian man's throat.

The man choked, his hands gripping frantically at his neck as blood seeped between his fingers. He stumbled, falling to his knees. He wouldn't get back up again.

Galahad gripped the dagger tighter, his other hand pressed to his side, his palm tacky with blood. The bloodflow was slower than that of the man dying in front of him, but no less dangerous if he didn't find help. But even that would have to wait.

He pivoted, barely missing the longsword that came crashing down into the dirt next to him. The attacker growled, all of his strength focused on pulling the heavy sword up again. Galahad darted forward, driving the dagger's point between the armor plates under the man's armpit, the blade piercing up through his collarbone. The man wailed and Galahad pushed him away, the weapon nearly slipping from his hands. The Reusian kicked out as he fell,

causing Galahad to stumble. He landed hard on his knees and something in his sternum audibly cracked. Pain laced through Galahad's chest, sapping his breath.

A woman’s scream drew him from his daze.

He stumbled upward, the blade still miraculously in his grip as he threw himself forward to tackle a man attempting to pass him. Hindered by the heavy, unfitted armor he wore, the man struggled as Galahad swiped at him from above, missing his face by inches. The attacker grabbed Galahad by the back of his tunic, yanking him up and over his prone body. He landed in the dirt, scrambling away from the boot heel aiming for his face. His dagger was gone, still stuck in the ground where the man’s head had been, and he rolled upward, little thought to his movements save survival. *Keep moving, always keep moving; never give them an opening,* Tristan’s voice sang in his head.

The man he'd tackled was standing again, distracted from his original target, his focus solely on Galahad. The knight dodged as the man rushed him, swinging blindly at Galahad with rage but little finesse, the axe in his hands too short to do any damage unless he was able to get close. The Reusian swung again but stumbled, careening in the other direction as he tripped and fell, dropping his weapon as he collapsed.

Galahad moved closer, picking up the fallen axe. The man turned over and staggered up into a crouch, pulling a long knife from his belt. He waited, sizing Galahad up and liking his chances, if his rotten smile was any indication.

Galahad panted, every inhale a new agony. The man charged.

Keeping still, Galahad pitched the axe straight into the man’s brow.

His attacker staggered, the man’s knife dropping from his hands as he mindlessly clutched at the metal splitting his forehead. He fell to his knees, a gargled sound escaping his lips. Galahad took two steps forward, three; he retrieved the knife at the man’s feet. It wasn't a killing blow. The distance was too short and Galahad too weak for the axe to fully penetrate the man’s skull, but it was enough.

With no mercy left to give, Galahad slit the man’s throat.

Six bodies in total surround him, the soil wet with blood. The woman’s cries had stopped, and for a sickening moment he feared this had all been a waste. Yet when Galahad turned back to the wall where she'd earlier curled herself, he found her staring back at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. Her pale blue dress was covered in grit, but no blood. Other than a shallow cut above her brow, she didn't appear injured.

Around them, the sound of screams and clashing swords had finally ceased. Smoke billowed from the Reusian courtyard, surrounding them in a pungent cloud. Shouts rang out in their direction, and Galahad knew he had nothing left to give.

He turned toward the voices, positioning himself in front of the woman.

Pain washed over him, finally. The grating sharpness of his broken ribs was matched only by the searing ache along his side. His hand pressed tightly against the gaping wound, the blood pouring faster now, running down his leg to mix with the dirt below. He only had a moment to think—to realize he was teetering precariously to one side—before his legs finally gave out. He sank to the ground, knees digging into the russet mud. His fingers were numb, but he didn't drop the knife, some primal need to keep it close overtaking him.

More footsteps neared, blurry figures appearing through a haze of gray.

Galahad waited, smoke burning his throat. The soldiers who approached wore royal armor, and he knew then that they were Feris' men, come to claim him.

The woman would live, and he would die.

It would have to be enough.

* * *

Chapter 3

* * *

(*-now-)*
(-five years later-)

Tristan had been on the outskirts of Rome for nearly a week, the crowds in the rural province of Imperia restless and thirsty for blood. The carnage of the gladiatorial tournaments had fallen out of favor within the gilded gates of the capitol, Rome's growing religious fervor finally enough to blot out the inveterate shame of the games. But death still prevailed on the fringes.

For many provincial towns skirting the empire's edge, the pious decrees had not been met with open hearts.

In Imperia, the *munera* had two days yet remaining. The city's highest-ranking magistrate, hosting the bloody spectacle as a means to foster his reelection, had expanded the annual celebration by an additional day to please a jaded populace. Long contracted to provide the entertainment, Tristan's master hadn't been happy to hear of the change a day before the festivities were set to begin.

Vantius' second and third best fighters had been unexpectantly killed nearly a month ago, but he'd yet to acquire a battleworthy batch of men to replace them. He had made due, honoring his agreement with the magistrate as best he could, but the extra day now left a large gap to fill in the troupe's allotted schedule. Sending Tristan to fight, of course, was out of the question.

Vantius had long forbade Tristan to perform in Imperia, believing the familiarly of Roman soil too great a temptation. The slaver had grown weary of the Sarmatian's attempts at escape over the years—so much so that Tristan was almost always chained, save his bouts in the ring. But with his reputation at stake, Vantius had little choice in the matter now.

Tristan would have to hunt.

Within the deteriorating amphitheaters to which they traveled, Tristan had faced a handful of skilled fighters over the years. Some were physically superior; their bodies strong, made to take blows other men could not. Some were volunteers, contracted by Vantius in a youthful attempt to gain infamy atop the gladiatorial pitch. More often than not, however, Tristan had faced men who soiled themselves in abject fear. He'd never killed for sport, contrary to what others had once believed of him. He took pleasure in fighting, certainly. The physicality of the clash, the instinct behind every blow. To look another man in the eye during righteous combat, to face a warrior—that was an altogether different matter.

Nothing about the arena was righteous.

Tristan was too efficient a fighter for any of the bouts to last long—even against those with a modicum of talent for killing—but he'd slaughtered the frightened ones quickly when he could. Better a fast death at Tristan's blade than the pit, where far worse things than a merciful sword awaited. Spectators wanted a contest, yet no amount of abuse from Vantius or his underlings had compelled Tristan to kill at a slower pace. Over time, he'd been relegated to the beasts instead. The animals were worse, in some ways. Pulled from some distant grassland to be caged on foreign soil; kept docile by chains or dulling medicaments. A criminal could at least understand the pisspoor reason he was dying.

Tristan had nearly perished the first time he'd been forced into the hunt. He'd fought an elderly bear, its eyes a dull, milky yellow from disease. Even half blind, its claws had left four gouges along his side, his blood soaking deep into the sands of the amphitheater that day. Tristan had survived—and Vantius had found a new stream of revenue.

In two days, Tristan would hunt for the crowds of Imperia.

Today, however, a more welcome pursuit awaited him.

Between hunts, when the menagerie of claws and horns were scarce, Vantius had taken to having Tristan teach the owls and hawks tricks. Before the human contests, hares would be released into the arena in a tangle of scuttling limbs. On those days, as Tristan freed the birds in a flurry of talons and feathers, he far preferred the screams of rabbits to men.

The spectators cared little for the avian tricks, half the audience bored, the other too busy chatting to marvel at the displays of aerial grace. He should have hated every moment of it—the hundreds of eyes watching from the stands above, looking at him like an animal—but the hours he'd spent with the birds had provided his only real sense of normalcy over the years. Sometimes as he trained the fledglings, he imagined Galahad watching him from afar, laughing as Tristan found himself irately scrubbing owl shit from his hair.

When they'd been boys, Galahad would sometimes sit with him as he worked, the younger knight busy sewing a patch onto his tunic or sharpening a knife, but he'd always watched out of the corner of his eye. Anytime Tristan spoke of a bird's beauty, its fierce intelligence, Galahad had taken great delight in pointing out a new speckle of excrement. His last hawk at the outpost had taken quite a shine to Galahad, though Tristan couldn't say with certainty why. He'd long suspected Galahad to be feeding her when he was away from the tower, but the knight had refused to admit to it. His smirk had always said enough.

As Tristan watched the birds glide between the pillars of the Imperian arena, searching for their quarry below, he hoped not for the first time that she'd somehow escaped the bloodshed of that night.

After the performance, Vantius' underlings wasted no time in re-chaining Tristan and returning him to his cell deep within the magistrate's compound. His cage for the night was a barren chamber of stone and hay, somewhere in the lowest level of the fortress. A dozen other barred cells surrounded the room, each filled with the rest of Vantius' meager troupe of slaves.

Tristan slowly unlaced the rawhide gauntlets from his forearms, the indents from the birds' strong talons still fresh. He'd been provided a bucket of water, which he used to clean away the grime that streaked his face and neck. Scooping another handful, he ran his fingers through his short hair and shook free the water droplets. He removed his outer jerkin next, tossing it over the foot of his cot. His garments were made up of threadbare tunics now, nothing to mark him as a foreigner, save perhaps the tribe-centric tattoos cresting his cheekbones. Vantius had once threatened to scour the symbols from his face, though the elderly man had never followed through, perhaps realizing he might need to preserve Tristan's exoticness for some future endeavor.

Vantius had always made certain to never advertise Tristan as anything but a common slave —and certainly not a *Sarmatian* slave. He'd long suspected, given the quickness by which he'd been sold to a string of masters in those early days, that Vantius had paid quite a fortune for him. The Reusian businessman had no intention of seeing Tristan taken from him any time soon.

A chalice of sour wine and a plate of food awaited him, and Tristan devoured his dinner mindlessly before settling onto his cot.

His sleep that night was fitful, but when his eyes opened sometime before dawn, he knew it wasn't due to the snores emanating from a neighboring cell. A chorus of frantic shouts had arisen from the upper levels of the compound, and he listened warily as the guards' boots quickly climbed the stairs. Moments later, a wave of smoke wafted down, filling the chamber with the odor of charred wood.

Somewhere above, the magistrate's household burned.

Tristan sat up on his cot, waiting. The Romans and Reusians both dreaded fire—entire swathes of their beloved cities in peril if so much as a candle was misplaced. A rich man had many concerns when his house was ablaze, but slaves were not one of them. Either they'd smother the inferno, or Tristan and the others would succumb to the flames.

A hooded man descended the stairs, a thin layer of smoke lapping at his dark cloak. In his hand dangled a ring of keys, and Tristan watched as the stranger moved from cell to cell, his palms clutching at the bars as he peered inside. Slaves reached for him as he neared, panicked by the commotion, but he passed them without a word. Tristan watched the man approach the farthest compartment, a large trunk of precious gems and gold pieces locked inside. Vantius had never trusted the hospitality of any host, always insisting on sealing his possessions alongside his slaves. Guards were typically stationed at the entrance to their cells, but the fire had clearly drawn their attention upstairs.

A cunning, ruthless thief—Tristan was almost impressed.

Should he and the others die tonight, he'd take some small comfort knowing that Vantius would likely lose his entire livelihood to the flames.

When the bandit reached the back cell, however, he took no more than a cursory glance at the trunk before moving down the opposite row of bars toward Tristan's cage. Growing wary, Tristan backed himself against the farthest wall, letting the shadows swallow him as best they

could. The thief-not-thief stopped, and Tristan imagined him squinting into the blackness of the cell. By now, his eyes would have adjusted to the near darkness of the vault, where only a small grated window provided a glint of fading moonlight. The stranger released the bars and moved off toward the next cell.

Tristan exhaled.

The man suddenly stopped and stepped back, his hood now tipped in Tristan's direction. He leaned forward, resting his arms against a cross-section of the bars.

"You were certainly a hard bastard to find," the not-thief mused as he jangled the ring of keys on his finger. "Would you like to be free of this place?"

Tristan didn't answer, frozen by the devastating familiarity of the voice.

The man scoffed and pulled the keys through the bars, inserting one into the lock. With a quick turn, the door opened.

From beneath his hood, Gawain smiled.

"You have a powerful friend who always keeps his promises."

* * *

Caught in the fever of escape, there was little time for explanation.

The fire raged across the upper levels of the compound, the guards too focused on carrying troughs of water toward the burning towers to notice a small group of men creeping along the edges of the villa. The freed slaves scattered once they broke the perimeter, and Tristan let them go, no particular fondness for any of the ragged bunch. Gawain had a direction in mind, but Tristan seized his elbow, leading him back toward the stables. He didn't look particularly pleased that Tristan had usurped his plan, but he followed nonetheless.

It didn't take Tristan long to unbar the small cages that lined the barn. Gawain huffed in annoyance but helped him, quickly prompting the half-dozen birds of prey to flight though an open hatch in the roof. As they scattered into the pre-dawn sky, Gawain grabbed his sleeve, directing him toward the door.

Tristan pulled free, jogging to the back. Through the bars of a small iron cage, an old tiger watched with rheumy eyes as Tristan flung the bolt and cracked open the door. Vantius had acquired the beast outside of Hyrcania, its fur patchy and fading with age. With more bones than meat left on its emaciated body, Tristan would have killed it easily. Gawain choked back a curse as the animal ambled slowly onto its feet.

Tristan and the tiger wouldn't get their final dance—but it seemed only fair to allow the creature one last hunt.

He took Gawain by elbow, pulling him quickly from the stables.

As they approached the treeline that surrounded the compound, the screams inside the villa rapidly changed from fear to terror, though Tristan had little time to enjoy the sound. Two of Vantius' guards had spotted them, their borrowed Roman horses gaining quickly as he and Gawain raced into the trees on foot. At the threshold of the forest the gaps between the trunks were wider, leaving the horses ample room to maneuver. The knights weaved, a mad dash to keep one step ahead, but the horses were too familiar with the forestry to be deterred.

An arrow streaked past Tristan's ear, lodging into the closest rider's shoulder. The man screamed and toppled off his horse as a second arrow sang, striking the remaining guard in the chest. The blow sent the man sliding sideways, his horse rearing in panic. They kept running, Gawain insistently dragging him in the direction of the arrows. In the distance, Tristan saw a man on horseback lowering his bow. Tall and hooded, he waited alone, two chestnut mares tied to a tree next to him.

"Excellent timing," Gawain panted, sliding to a halt next to one of the rider-less horses.

The bowman looked down at Tristan and nodded, the gesture both question and greeting. Dagonet had always been a man who cherished his words.

Tristan answered by sliding a boot into the remaining horse's stirrup and swinging his other leg over the creature's back. He settled into the saddle and took up the reigns, just as a horn sounded in the distance. With a nod of understanding, the Sarmatians set off at a gallop. They rode for hours, pushing the horses at an unsustainable pace. No longer accustomed to the rigors of riding, Tristan simply held on, bearing the pain and tightening his heels whenever Gawain and Dagonet raced too far ahead.

Later in the day, they drew to a stop along a dirt road lined with short trees, a sea of flat grass around them.

A covered wagon awaited them.

Tristan faltered when his feet hit the ground, gripping the saddle to keep himself upright as an old man sitting atop the wagon tossed a green cloak in his direction. After slipping the wrap over his head, Gawain ushered him inside the cart and motioned for him to lie flat.

"This will be unpleasant, but we promise to explain everything once we arrive in Festus."

Gawain pulled two thick blankets from the bench, covering Tristan from head to boot. He felt the wagon jerk as Gawain jumped from the back, and after a few moments, the wooden contraption rattled forward, two mules pulling it steadily along the rocky path. Exhausted from the journey, overheated by the blankets, Tristan remembered little of the ride. He woke some time later as the wagon's wheels shifted from dirt and pebbles to patches of stone. When the motion finally stopped altogether, Tristan tensed, his fingers aching for a sword.

The blankets were pulled from his body, cool air rushing into his lungs as he took a deep breath, coughing at the sensation. To his left Gawain demanded water from someone, and

soon a bowl was placed against Tristan's parched lips. He drank until it choked him, droplets of water running down his chin.

“Try not to make yourself sick,” a new voice said, as strong hands guided Tristan from the back of the wagon.

He stumbled at the bottom of the short steps, but the hands caught him and guided him to a wooden bench. Tristan sat, splinters biting into his palm as he gripped the seat tightly, his head spinning violently. When he was finally able to open his eyes, he found Arthur kneeling before him.

Clad in a layered red toga, Tristan had never seen Arthur adorned in anything so ostentatious. He wore the robes of a patrician, of a *politician*—clothes the Arthur he'd once known would have abhorred. The Roman seemed to notice Tristan’s fascination with his garments and he smiled faintly, placing his left hand on the knight’s shoulder. An open sleeve hung where his other arm had once been.

“Much has changed, my friend. You have many things to catch up on.”

Nearby, Dagonet and Gawain waited quietly, their happiness genuine but tainted by unspoken grief. The chamber was dim, a small fire burning in a stone forge set in the middle of the room. None of his other brothers stood behind them.

“Are they alive?” Tristan asked, his voice raw.

Dag and Gawain shared a hasty look as Arthur nodded.

“Some of them.”

“Who?”

“You've had a long day, why not…”

“Who?”

Arthur sighed. He didn't look as if he wanted to have this conversation now, but he wouldn’t deny Tristan the truth. Arthur had never been capable of lying to his knights with any conviction, so he’d simply never tried. It was the Roman’s honesty that had earned Tristan’s loyalty in those early days.

“We believe Bors to be alive, and I was able to obtain Geraint’s freedom a year ago.”

He paused, his voice growing uncertain.

“Lamorak is unaccounted for—” he hesitated, “—as is Lancelot.”

When Arthur did not continue, Tristan felt a wave of sorrow crest above his head. He needed to know; needed to hear it spoken aloud.

“And Galahad?”

Arthur swallowed, but didn't look away.

"Galahad was executed—a short time after arriving in Reus."

Tristan let the dark flood sweep him away.

* * *

The Reusian province of Festus had fallen under Rome's control in the waning days of the Great War, its customs supplanted over the centuries as the populace aged and eventually merged with its conquers. To the Romans, Fesus was an unwanted child; provided for, but unloved. To the Reusians, it represented failure in need of correction; a golden history etched upon flawed marble.

Its provenance had made Festus the perfect city to host the peace accords.

After years of negotiation, reconciliation between Reus and Rome was nigh. A permanent treaty, meant to end the longstanding aggression, would soon commence in what many hoped to be a new age of friendly, prosperous relations. The final talks had been running for a nearly a week now, the allocation of several minor trading routes in the east the only remaining issue. Should all go well, the official contract was to be signed tomorrow evening.

Tonight, the wolves celebrated in early triumph.

As he watched them, Tristan hoped that someday both nations would burn.

Politicians and nobles from both Reus and Rome, some with direct roles in the accords, others simply there to promote their business ventures amongst a new clientele, socialized with the pretentious ease of men who'd never seen war up-close.

The Reusian ambassador, Marcus, mingled amid the Roman nobility with the practiced ease and boundless vibrancy of a man long accustomed to such a life. He appeared younger than he was, his boyish face alit in a consummate smile, but the graying hair along his temples told Tristan the man was at least a decade older than himself. Unlike the Reusian military commanders and legislators who had jointed him that evening, Marcus' entourage was small —an undersecretary and scribe, as well as an apprentice. Three hooded *ligare* guards kept a watchful eye on their master as Marcus weaved between the guests.

Not all of Rome's elite approved of the treaty, fearing its promises would be meaningless if the successor to Reus' ailing monarch choose to negate on the bargain. Violence wasn't expected, but the mood was strained. Earlier in the night, when an unassuming nobleman had drawn too close to Marcus with a serving knife, the *ligare* had slipped between the ambassador and the hapless Roman with dangerous ease. Marcus had quickly soothed the situation, but the tension was palpable.

Trust would be a long time coming.

Centurions from both nations lined the walls, purposefully mixed together in an attempt to show solidarity. The *ligare* didn't abide by such rules, keeping close to their master at all times. In place of armor they wore ebony tunics and slopping dark hoods, their faces hidden by ornate masks made of silver and gold. Dagonet had told him the Reusian royalty saw their personal guard as infallible, their identities hidden as a means to prevent corruption. Any sentinel could be bribed, the saying went, if one knew his face at the local tavern.

The *ligare* lived in the same household as their masters, their loyalty bred though years of service, Dag explained.

“Infallible my arse,” Gawain had muttered bitterly, sipping at his wine and smirking. “Accustomed to all manner of *service,* I imagine.”

Infallible or not, they were by far the most dangerous people in the room.

Tristan had always been able to read his opponents, but these three gave little away.

The largest reminded him of Bors a bit; the wide chest, the broad shoulders. But he was taller than Bors, a good half-head above Tristan as well. The other two were smaller, leaner; they moved with an ease their comrade’s size wouldn't allow. Tristan suspected one to be a woman, though nothing in the *ligare* uniform verified that assumption. She was a hair smaller than the other, and barefaced—at least from what little skin Tristan could see at the juncture of her mask and hood.

The other’s stance was heavier, and a short beard covered the lower half of his face, raising his mask ever so slightly. The *ligare* had no obvious rank, though this one remained a shadow at Marcus’ side all evening. He had Marcus’ ear, while the others flanked their master at a longer—though no less watchful—distance.

Tristan would have to kill this one first, should the negotiations sour.

Across the room, Arthur also brought his charms to bear upon the crowd. His short years in the Senate had been fruitful, his connections with both the aristocratic houses and military a boon as he worked tirelessly to broker peace with Reus. How he could walk so casually amongst the monsters who'd taken his arm, Tristan could not fathom.

Dressed as part of Arthur’s private guard, no one bothered Tristan as he stood his post quietly at the back of the room. The *ligare* weren't alone in hiding their identity this evening. The edges of Tristan’s helm enclosed the sides of his face, while a thin bronze mask covered his eyes and down the left side of his face. It was not unusual for disfigured soldiers to continue their duties once healed, but the average Roman citizen had little appetite for viewing the damage of their wars. The sturdy ceremonial mask, common during parades, was meant to hide the goriest of battlefield scars. Leave it to the Romans to desire conflict, but not its consequences.

Gawain and Dagonet stood nearby, no more willing to embrace the pomp of such an event. Peace was a means to an end for all of them. The terms of the armistice, as brokered by Arthur and Marcus, had demanded the return of all Reusian and Roman prisoners of war,

even indentured foreigners. Dagonet had been part of a goodwill exchange several months prior, with Marcus promising personal attention to Arthur's lost garrison.

Once the knights were returned, nothing would formally bind them to Arthur. Gawain and Dag had already received their papers. Geraint, ever the outsider of their group, had abandoned Rome and his fellow knights of his own volition weeks ago.

When he was a free man again, Tristan didn't know where he would go.

If he would go.

The desire to see his homeland again—to walk amongst a people more content to barter their own children than fight—had curdled during his years in captivity. Even if he did go, he doomed himself to live amid strangers. Tristan had never assimilated into Roman culture. None of them truly had. Yet the Romans would always see them as foreign, just as the Sarmatian clans would ostracize them as outsiders. It was a cruel fate, to be welcomed back to one's own home with suspicion.

For a time, he'd thought such a return might be bearable, were he not to go alone.

He would never know now.

Whatever happened in the coming weeks, Tristan could feel the growing pull of isolation. He loved his brothers; would die for any of them. But the memories their faces sparked in to him were growing unbearable.

He didn't seem to be the only one suffering.

Next to Tristan, Gawain took a long pull of wine, emptying his sixth chalice of the evening. He had grown more agitated the longer the night wore on, and Tristan had glanced at Dag more than once to gauge his reaction. The other man had appeared equally as worried at Gawain's behavior, though he said nothing to Tristan.

Gawain had arrived in Rome nearly four years ago, the first of the knights returned to Arthur's side. His escape from the labor camp to which he'd been sold was the result of simple chance: His master's guards, drunk on too much barley wine, had accidentally left his cell unlocked one night. Gawain had slipped away as they slumbered, never looking back.

The Fates hadn't been as kind to Tristan, though not for lack of trying.

Around the large chamber, the inebriated nobles eventually began to make their slow march back to their quarters for the evening. When the hall had finally cleared of stragglers and the servants took up their cleaning duties, Arthur motioned Marcus and his guards into an anteroom. Officially, the fate of Arthur's garrison would be revealed tomorrow, but Marcus had requested a private parlay beforehand. Arthur had agreed to the terms, eager for information.

Gawain and Dagonet followed the group, while Tristan slipped out of the banquet hall and into an adjacent storeroom. His presence would have been suspicious, even with his mask, so

Arthur had instructed him to only observe. Removing his helm, Tristan slid his body through a tapestry-covered opening in the wall, slipping into a narrow passageway that bordered both rooms. He stilled as their voices grew louder, watching through a thin fissure in the masonry as Arthur and the others entered the antechamber.

“Thank you for agreeing to this gathering,” Marcus said, a cup of wine still clutched in his hand as he took a seat at the room’s long table. Tristan had noticed the man playfully sipping at the drink all night, yet he'd never once requested a refill.

Curious.

“Of course,” Arthur responded mildly, joining him at the table. His tone was pleasant, though something about it rang false to Tristan, and he stood a bit straighter, wary of Arthur’s sudden callousness.

“As discussed,” Marcus continued, “I have seen to your request personally these last few months, as I know your circumstances are unique. Your time in the battlefield is well regarded, even amongst the Reusian military.”

Across the room, Gawain shifted anxiously.

“Have you located my men?” Arthur asked.

Marcus nodded. He removed a trio of small rolled parchments from the pocket of his robes, handing the first to Arthur.

“A list of the non-Roman personnel taken from your outpost, as best reconstructed so many years later. I’m sure you understand the difficulty of such a request, given the upheaval happening in Reus at the time of their assimilation.”

Arthur scanned the list, nodding to himself.

“And my knights?”

Marcus handed him the second paper.

“Sir Lamorak was located on a farm outside of Reus proper. He has been freed, but asks to remain with his wife until she gives birth. He has provided correspondence to you, sealed by his own hand.”

“Sir Bors?”

Marcus nodded. “He is in transit, as promised, but he suffered a broken leg in a mining accident prior to his release. He cannot ride, so the journey will be slow, but he should arrive safely in a week’s time. I requested that my courier return with a letter from him, but he said your knight refused.”

“Then I have no proof of life,” Arthur pressed, his tone growing cold.

“He provided a verbal message, that my courier dictated. If you would permit me.”

Marcus handed the last parchment to Arthur, who unrolled it. He stared at it a long moment, then passed it to Dag, who chuckled and held the page up a bit higher than necessary, just enough for Tristan to read the words over his shoulder: *GO FUCK YERSELF.*

Arthur leaned back.

“Sir Tristan?”

Tristan had been expecting the question.

Arthur has risked the stability of the accords by sending a party after him, but information from a credible source had left the Roman with few options. If they revealed Tristan now, it meant Arthur had sanctioned an attack against a prominent Reusian citizen. The risk of retaliation was simply too great. For the time being, their only choice was to plead ignorance.

Marcus seemed prepared for the question as well.

“Unfortunately, his whereabouts are still unknown. We tracked his original owner, but ill health may have led him to sell his slaves without keeping accurate records. Once the treaty is signed, however, there will be an ample reward waiting for anyone with information. I understand this isn’t the outcome you would have preferred, senator. Upon my honor, I’m doing everything in my power to recover Sir Tristan.”

Marcus leaned closer, his hands clasped before him.

“As you’re aware, I initiated this conversation so that we might discuss matters of a more sensitive nature. I'm sure you’ve heard rumors, and I'd hoped to speak of the circumstances surround your remaining knights--”

Arthur raised his hand. “Ambassador, your delay tactics are not helping.”

“Senator?” Marcus asked, clearly taken aback.

Gawain stumbled forward, slamming a fist down onto the table. “Where the bloody fuck is Lancelot?!”

The *ligare* all moved at once, fanning around the table in defensive positions. They didn't draw their daggers, but one false step and the room would erupt. Tristan’s hand tightened around the hilt of his borrowed sword.

“*Enough*,” Arthur commanded, his eyes boring into Gawain.

Marcus hesitated, the silence too long for Tristan’s liking. The Reusian seemed unsure of what he was to say next, as if he had perhaps hoped to break the news in a different way.

“If you would permit me—”

“Sir Lancelot?” Arthur asked.

“Senator,” Marcus beseeched, “if we could perhaps start with what transpired with Sir Galahad…”

“We care not for Galahad!” Gawain snapped, throwing his cup. It struck the false wall near Tristan with a hallow twang, the stones splashed red with wine.

Before the *ligare* could react, Arthur stood, pivoting toward Gawain.

“I said *enough*!"

Gawain turned in righteous anger, pushing through the doors and disappearing into the hallway beyond. The room stood quiet, the tension growing by the moment. Arthur looked furious, his clenched fist shaking as he worked to gather himself.

“Ambassador. *Marcus*. Your help has been invaluable, and I am grateful for the work you’ve done to help find my men. However, neither of us can change the past, and I don't desire to rehash the atrocities committed in the name of war. I simply wish to move forward—we *all* wish to move forward. There's only one final piece of information I'm interested in learning.”

He placed his open palm against the tabletop, hesitating.

“Sir Lancelot, ambassador. Is he dead?”

Marcus paused for only a moment—a reluctance he couldn't hide, even with his snakecharmer ways. Whether it was because he feared for the treaty, or his own life, Tristan couldn't say. Perhaps a little of both.

He nodded.

“Sir Lancelot was taken by sickness a few months after he was brought to Reus.”

Arthur took a deep breath. “You're positive?”

Marcus managed to look Arthur in the eyes as he spoke. “I saw his body myself, soon after it happened. I am truly sorry.”

Arthur nodded, his expression stony. It was the face of a man accepting an answer he didn’t wish to believe.

“Thank you for your candor,” Arthur finally replied, stepping back. “It's been a long day for everyone, ambassador, and I feel it best to retire. I apologize for Gawain’s behavior, and take full responsibility for any offense it may have caused. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow at the ceremony.”

“Of course, senator.”

Arthur turned and walked out, Dagonet following close behind him.

The *ligare* shadowing Marcus bent down, murmuring something quickly into the Reusian’s ear. Marcus nodded once and stood, motioning for the guards to follow him into the corridor.

Tristan slipped out of his hiding place, peering into the hallway beyond.

Down the corridor, Gawain stood against the wall with his arms tightly crossed. Arthur was gone, but Dagonet stood arguing with him, a finger pressed into the blond man's chest. Both quieted when they noticed Marcus and the *ligare* nearing. Though Gawain didn't advance, the *ligare* took up a tighter formation around Marcus nevertheless. Even from a distance, Tristan could smell the sour alcohol that permeated Gawain's clothes. He'd always been a kind drunk, full of stories and laughter. This bitter, venomous shell was not the Gawain he'd once known.

They were all different men now, he supposed.

Something about Gawain's anger was worse, in a way. There would be no cure to it, now that Galahad was gone. The opposite temperaments of their youngest knights had always worked best in tandem. When Galahad thundered, Gawain had been the most suited to soothing his prickly disposition. When Gawain's rage boiled over, it was Galahad who'd always broken through his malaise. Now it seemed that Gawain had lost himself, not to the chains of captivity, but to the lonely years that had followed. He'd long tried to find them on his own—Arthur's diplomacy a weapon he couldn't wield—but he'd failed to locate them, journey after miserable journey. Every time he'd returned to Rome unsuccessful, another piece of himself had been misplaced.

Now Gawain was picking fights with merciless men simply because he could.

As the largest and smallest of the *ligare* ushered their master away, the middle guard planted himself between the two groups, clearly afraid Gawain would throw himself at Marcus as they passed. When the ambassador and his escorts finally disappeared from the corridor, the remaining *ligare* turned to follow.

Gawain laughed viciously.

"Run home to your master, *whore*. I hear him calling."

The man stopped, his back tense.

Tristan stepped forward into the hall just as Dagonet slid between Gawain and the Reusian, his larger body blocking either from colliding in a tangle of fists. He looked down at the *ligare*, his loyalty to Gawain evident.

"Go," Dagonet commanded, though not unkind.

Interesting.

The guard uncoiled himself, withdrawing slowly. When he finally turned from the Sarmatians, he didn't look back.

Tristan watched him go, his eyes drawn to the still-sheathed dagger on the *ligare's* belt.

* * *

Tristan paced his quarters, his agitated mind wreaking havoc upon his weary body.

Something about Arthur's behavior that night had bothered him—*all* of their behavior. Gawain's recklessness, Dag's indecision. From the moment he'd arrived in this godsforsaken city, their actions had been guarded.

Secretive.

Tristan had been more than willing to disregard his unease in those first few days of reunion. He'd grown accustomed to being accountable only to himself, years spent alone in his own head, his own idiosyncrasies. He'd hoped his suspicious disputation would change, now that he was back amongst friends, but somehow it had only grown worse.

Unable to sleep, he slipped out of his room. Roman sentries were stationed at the entrance to Arthur's wing of the compound, but the hallways that led to their sleeping quarters were empty. Free of his costume, Tristan walked the halls in a loose nightshirt and breeches. Gawain and Dag's chambers were empty as he passed, but angry voices drew him to Arthur's door at the end of the corridor. He entered quietly, shutting the door softly behind him.

In the dining area, Gawain and Arthur were arguing. Dagonet stood nearby, jaw clenching as he eyed the floor.

"… you let that serpent into your presence is beyond me," Gawain was ranting, his arms raised in anger. He looked better than he had earlier, sobriety finally sinking in again.

"Do you think I had a *choice*?" Arthur growled, his stoicism breaking word by word.

"You had a *choice* to accept that utter horseshit about Lancelot."

"How dare you--"

"Those bastards tore Galahad to *fucking pieces* as he begged for his life*!"* Gawain snarled. "Gods only know what those two bastards did to him *before* that. You cannot trust--"

It was Dag who noticed Tristan first, his eyes widening in surprise.

As the awareness of Tristan's presence spread, Gawain and Arthur both stilled.

"Tristan, I didn't--" Gawain's faced paled, the anger seeping out of him. "You weren't supposed to find out this way."

"And in what way was I supposed to find out?" Tristan countered.

Arthur sighed heavily, shame writ clear across his features. “We were going to tell you, but we thought it best to wait.”

“For what, exactly?”

Arthur and Gawain shared a look.

“That Marcus had a part in Galahad’s death,” Dag offered, crossing his arms tightly. “We feared you'd do something rash if you knew. We should have told you.”

Tristan turned away, the hot scorch of betrayal burning in his chest. He'd never been one for words when a sword would do—now he wasn't certain which he preferred.

Arthur stepped forward. He knew better than to touch Tristan, though he looked like he wanted to.

“Galahad was executed, as we told you.”

“Accused of participating in a rebellion. Was that a lie?”

“No—no. That was the truth. We only wished to spare you the details. You were already troubled by the news the day we found you.”

“I did not ask, so you did not elaborate.”

“It's not an easy thing to hear—you must believe we were only trying to help. But I will be truthful now, if you wish it.”

Tristan turned, nodding slowly. Arthur acquiesced.

“The allegations against Galahad were series, made more so by the fact that Feris’ rivals used it against him. As a show of strength, Feris had Galahad publicly tortured and executed. They beat him savagely for many hours; they took his eyes, then his hands. Feris kept him alive as long as possible. When it was over, they hung his body with the other rebel leaders.”

Tristan didn't speak, unable to form the desperate words he wanted to convey.

Are you sure?

But Arthur seemed to read his gaze.

“The details were corroborated by several informants, but it was witnessed by a reliable spy who returned bearing proof. During the ordeal, a broken buckle from Galahad’s belt was dropped into the crowd, and the spy was able to procure it before he fled Reus. The buckle bore my personal sigil—I had gifted it to Galahad after our first campaign.”

He'd always been so proud of that damned bauble.

Tristan swallowed. “What of Marcus’ involvement?”

“There were rumors at the time of Galahad’s execution that Marcus and Feris were at odds.”

“Over Galahad?”

“Hearsay only, but--” Arthur paused.

“They *wanted* him,” Gawain offered softly, his eyes downcast.

Tristan didn't need to ask in what way.

He clenched his fists as Arthur continued, only truth left to tell now.

“Marcus is the king’s half-brother, and it's believed Feris doesn't hold as much sway, being from a lesser household. It seems probable, going by conjecture, that Feris had Galahad executed not only because of the rebellion, but because Marcus would not relent his claim. Both would have rather seen Galahad dead than given to the other.”

The words bore into Tristan, but the molten blaze of anger he’d expected was only a distant roar, his mind saturated by fatal silence.

He'd yielded once, in a foolish bid to protect Galahad’s life. A capitulation that had doomed Galahad to months of needless agony. But Tristan was free of that burden now, his choices once more his own. Only one thing could set him free; only one thing would stop this.

The knowledge was so damningly simple.

Across the compound, one of Galahad’s executioners was within his reach.

* * *

(-before-)

In the back corner of the tavern, Tristan took his dinner alone. At this late hour the fire ran low, the tables already cleared and wiped for the night. Lyra had taken pity on him, refilling his cup twice as she continued her duties without so much as a word.

The revels had traveled outside, the courtyard now lined with men celebrating their return home.

Tristan flexed his wrist, wincing when it pulled too far to the side. He'd been eager to remove the bindings that had left him hobbled—probably a few days too soon, going by the tenderness he still felt whenever he moved it. Tristan had been injured before, of course. Head wounds and gashes, a bad tumble once from a hillside that had left him seeing double for days. But one broken wrist and he was useless. Deemed unfit to travel, to fight. He'd watched as Arthur and his brothers had embarked upon a campaign in the northern hills, leaving him behind for the first time.

They'd been gone for nearly three months.

When they'd returned that morning, weary from travel but healthy, an autumn chill welcomed them back to the outpost. It hadn't been the only chill.

Tristan swallowed a mouthful of ale, thumping the mug back down onto the table.

"Bad day?" a voice asked.

Tristan took another swig, wiping his chin with the back of his sore wrist. "Bad few months."

Lancelot threw himself into a chair, kicking his boots up onto the table. He looked tired but happy, his sunkisssed skin and greasy hair the results of a long ride.

"You've been ignoring us," he accused, picking at a cuticle.

Tristan said nothing, although he couldn't help but divert his eyes. He'd been there when they'd passed through the gates; their small army returned home, victorious. He simply hadn't stayed long.

With a sigh, Lancelot pulled his feet from the table and leaned forward. "Or more accurately, you've been ignoring *one* of us."

Tristan stilled mid-drink.

"Not much of a denial. You cannot be mad at Galahad forever, just speak with him. Whatever he did, it was innocent, surely?"

Tristan choked, coughing to clear his throat. "It's not…"

"Galahad's infatuation with you has hardly been a secret. It was only a matter of time until he did something stupid. Talk to him, Tristan. Forgive him, punch him in the mouth—whatever you need to do. He was appallingly churlish the first two weeks of our sojourn, so don't tell me all was well upon our departure."

A log snapped in the fire, sending a sliver of smoldering wood bouncing onto the stone floor. Tristan watched it burn.

He'd always been wary of Lancelot's charm, his ability to get the others to speak openly. It was never lost on Tristan that Lancelot was also Arthur's closest confidant, long years spent keeping their commander abreast of his knights' moods and minor squabbles. Lancelot was neither spy nor infiltrator—it was too deceitful a term for what they all shared. His only interest was in their wellbeing, but he was caught between two worlds.

Tristan set his drink down, peering at his hands. He knew Lancelot was waiting for him to agree, to finish his sulk and let his bygones go.

But it was not so simple. It never was.

Lancelot frowned, his voice lowering even though they were alone in the room. “Would I be correct to assume whatever happened was not… reciprocated?”

“Galahad did nothing wrong.”

“Tristan…”

“I kissed Galahad.”

Lancelot blinked at him, calm and catlike, as if he hadn't heard Tristan at all. But then the words seemed to sink in and he sat back in his chair, a look of surprise crossing his face.

“*Oh*.”

Tristan pushed his mug across the table, into Lancelot’s reach. The younger man didn't hesitate to drink, taking a long pull that lasted several seconds. He set the mug back down and stared at Tristan, his lips pursed in confusion.

I did more with my tongue thereafter, Tristan thought wearily, *but that is none of Arthur’s business.*

Tristan leaned back, letting his boot stretch out to crush the wooden ember beneath his heel. With only ash underfoot, he stood and stepped over the bench. He left Lancelot alone, the dying fire crackling softly in the background.

He needed to find Galahad.

* * *

(-*now*-)

The corridor was dark as he approached the Reusian guest quarters, slipping silently past the room’s unbolted wooden door. A hushed argument was brewing in the back of the apartment, tempered whispers that spoke of honor and disrespect. Avoiding the voices, he slipped into the master bedchamber. The room was eloquent, the mattress plush and the walls lined with silk draperies. Exotic furs lay piled over the bed, while a nearby table of glass pitchers offered wine and other fermented delights.

Ignoring all of it, he walked out onto the dark balcony and sat on the wide stone railing, his back pressed against the wall. One leg stretched along the edge, while the other dangled freely over the sleeping populace below. The sky was overcast, and the air smelled of rain.

He waited, a dagger resting in his lap.

The voices quieted after a time, the day finally finished. Dawn’s rosy fingers hesitated just beyond the horizon, waiting to take the countryside into its grasp.

A presence approached quietly, standing at the threshold of the balcony. He had little doubt the other man had noticed him, though he didn't turn away. Neither spoke for a time, watching the Roman guards make their rounds upon the city's protective wall.

Eventually the presence moved closer, placing a light hand on his shoulder.

"None of us expected the evening to go the way it did. I apologize."

"You did nothing wrong."

"I'd hoped the rumors hadn't mitigated so far a distance, but that was foolish."

"The timing was erroneous."

"If I had only spoken before--"

"I stopped you. It was my decision."

The man paused, his next words carefully chosen.

"There's no possible way they could have known. What was said—they did not *mean it.* You mustn't take it to heart."

He sighed, exhaustion griping him. "I know."

I think I know.

He turned, noting the fatigue on the older man's face. Smiling always took its toll.

"You should rest. We have a long day tomorrow."

"When this is over, promise me you'll try again?"

"I promise," he answered, pretending to believe his own lies. "But tonight, the dead must stay dead for everyone's sake."

Marcus nodded, not liking the response, but wise enough to know this was not a debate he could win. The ambassador turned back to his borrowed room, his golden ceremonial robes billowing behind him.

From his perch on the ledge, Galahad waited for the sunrise.

* * *

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

(-now-)

Reus was a beautiful city, warm and open in a way that Rome would never be.

Galahad had spent only a scant few months in Rome, his training far from the bedlam of the city's epicenter. His memories of those weeks were nebulous things—truths and falsehoods intermingling, made up of stories told to him by Roman centurions nostalgic for their homeland. He remembered the unremarkable, mostly. Narrow roads and alleys clogged with rickety carts and beasts of burden. The chaos of the morning *tabernae,* throngs of citizens pressed tightly together as they shopped. Snake charmers and gaunt panhandlers standing alongside bellowing merchants intent on hawking their vials of exotic oils and sulphur matches. To this day, Galahad still associated the smell of freshly seared marketplace sausage with that of the pestilential stink of trench sewage.

Reus had its warts, no urban area could avoid the disorder of so many bodies packed into such a finite space, but its design allowed for an easy flow to the pedestrian traffic that eased congestion. The streets were clean, the beggars appeased by handouts of food and clothing. The monarchy shared its opulence with the peasantry, not out of altruistic duty Galahad had come to find, but in its desperate need to quell the rumblings of unrest that had taken hold of its citizenry.

Founded on a host of ore deposits and natural springs, Reus had never wanted for resources. Its natural bounty was one of the few reasons it had survived its early wars with Rome, and now outright avoided it, as the Romans had come to depend on its exports. A mutual gain, as well as distrust, had formed between both nations, their common ancestral heritage and similar tongue making trading all the more ideal. Concord had been more profitable than warfare, but even that was coming to an end. The taking of several Roman outputs throughout Britannia—a reprisal for the slaughter of a Reusian garrison near the Carpathian Mountains—had set in motion a chain of events that looked to shattered the uneasy peace.

Every day Galahad stepped foot onto Reusian soil, he could sense the unease growing, even amid the nobility.

Feris had taken him to the royal market that morning, their progress through the stalls watched hawkishly by a dozen soldiers. At a booth selling metal trinkets, the Reusian commander had made a great show of pulling Galahad close, demanding that the vendor present his finest slave tags. A thousand years from now, Feris had said with a smile, someone would find the tag and not know if Galahad had been a slave or a dog.

The joke had received a laugh amongst his entourage, though for many of Feris' guards, their smiles were trite. They watched Galahad with weary impatience, just as they had at the camp in Britain, perhaps still confused why their commander had not yet fucked Galahad to death and been done with it. Often times, Galahad wondered that himself.

He had been in Reus for almost five months now, the days unbearably slow.

His brothers were gone, auctioned off to the highest bidder. Slaves yet again to new masters. Feris had kept their sale from him for a time, perhaps afraid Galahad might find a way to slit his throat in the night. Only Lancelot had been kept in Reus, a bargaining chip to retain Galahad's indefinite loyalty. Thus, in Reus he remained; a wraith at Feris' side. Paraded out when it was convenient, kept locked away for days when it was not. He endured—he had no other choice.

Their weekly sojourn to the market was more common than not these past few months. Galahad cared little for the jewelry glittering in the afternoon light, nor the line of finely-woven tapestries that fluttered in the wind. He followed mindlessly, obediently. When Feris tired of the vendors, they wandered the horse stalls and made small talk about the animals. During the equestrian auction later that afternoon, Galahad was prompted more than once to offer his opinion on the sale. His cavalry experience was a boon to Feris, who had little personal interest in horse breeding.

When asked his thoughts regarding the next items up for sale upon the block, however, Galahad had remained silent.

He hadn't been able to watch the slaves paraded out, his eyes drawn to his clenched hands. His brothers in their servitude would be used for all sorts of proclivities: hard labor, or farming; possibly a craft that required a skilled hand, if they were lucky. But not this, thank whatever gods were listening. This was bondage of a different nature.

Galahad knew he was fortunate, if fortune could be such a brittle thing. Feris had treated him well enough, his interest truly in the convenience of an easy bedding. That didn't mean pain was foreign to him; that there weren't nights that left bruises on his thighs, and mornings where his body was tender, his mind still sluggish from a haze of potions. It was careless at times; rough even, after a trying day.

But not vicious. Not exactly.

There were also moments, more than he cared to count, when the attention shown back to him had been pleasurable. Times when he clambered for any sense of comfort, no matter how vile the source. He'd craved that feeling, those seconds of detachment; his mind and body torn between the need to feel something, *anything*, and the festering hatred he'd felt towards himself after for such a weakness.

He'd been lucky. More than some.

In the waning daylight, after the last auction had ended, they walked the kiosks on the south side of courtyard, the carts and stands full of produce and live animals ready for slaughter.

A distant noise halted Galahad's tedious trudge. He turned his gaze to the west, seeking the source of the sound that had sent a chill dancing up his spine. Next to him Feris paused as well, drawn to the same commotion. The soldiers trailing them carried on a moment longer, stopping only when they realized their commander had ceased walking. And then they too heard the clash of swords.

The screaming started shortly after, a cacophony of terror that grew louder every passing second as lower caste citizens began to stream into the royal market, overwhelming the guards at the gates as they fled the fighting in the outer courtyard. The anarchists overtook the market walls, dropping by the dozens around the fleeing nobles. The attack was swift, so secretive that, Galahad would learn later, even the palace spies had been ignorant of the rebellion simmering in their midst.

Fighting erupted and Feris barked orders, scrambling his men to protect the nobles.

Galahad knew this would be his only chance of escape. Feris had auctioned his brothers, banished them to the farthest corners of a godsforsaken land, but he had left one within Galahad's reach. And Galahad knew exactly where to find him.

Lancelot had been sent to toil in the gold mines, a daily walk several miles back and forth each way. Galahad had seen him once, following a line of dust-covered men as they returned to their barracks in the late afternoon. When the alarm went up, the guards would be called to defend the King, their thoughts far from the group of slaves already locked safely away.

Galahad pivoted toward a gap in the stalls, just as one of Feris' men slapped a meaty hand around his wrist. He drove his elbow into the man's face, breaking his jaw. The guard dropped like a stone and Galahad ran, heart hammering in his chest as he slid his body between the tight space between two parallel stands. He turned for just a moment, catching a glimpse of Feris' livid expression, then weaved behind another stall, putting more distance between them.

The gate was within his sights when he heard the scream.

A woman sobbed as a man dragged her by the hair, her wails of pain making her attacker laugh. He shoved her into the ground, a cloud of dust rising around her. She scrambled backwards, but a courtyard wall blocked her path as the man stalked toward her again, the knife held at his side already stained with someone else's blood.

The gate beckoned to Galahad, the rebels now in active combat with the guards. They were losing, the aggressors desperate but untrained, the surprise of their attack fading by the moment. He had to run now, or not at all.

Later, he could not say he regretted his decision. His choice, if there had ever been one, had been taken from him the moment he'd laid eyes upon her. Even as Feris' personal guards dragged him across the courtyard, bloody and nearly unconscious, he'd taken some small comfort in the fact that she was alive.

Galahad was dropped onto the dirt floor of a prison cell, the air driven from his breast. His lungs seized and he drew in a deep breath, coughing at the sensation as the barred door

screeched shut behind him. He closed his eyes to ward off the pain that radiated from his side, swallowing back the cooper taste on his tongue. The high windows in the cell were dark, the room lit only by the weak flicker of a single torch set into the wall outside his cage.

He drifted in and out of awareness, the sounds of the quelled rebellion outside dissipating just as quickly as they had begun.

The need to curl up on himself was so overwhelming he would have, if it weren't for the pair of hands suddenly holding his shoulders to the ground. Something moved to his left, and a voice spoke to him. Galahad kept his eyes sealed, neither caring nor desiring to see who awaited him. He struggled against the grip on his body, his vision blurred in agony. The voice spoke to him again but it was gibberish, a language forced upon him as a boy that he no longer had any interest in hearing.

He was going to die here, rotted from the inside out.

The hands pulled at his tunic, trying to undo his belt, and he kicked wildly, the soles of his sandals scrapping against the floor. He didn't want this, not now, not anymore…

gods, please no… please no… please…

The hands released him and he sobbed, relief and exhaustion overwhelming him.

He wished death would claim him and be done with him—but it did not.

The voice returned, but it was different somehow, changed in a way that made Galahad's chaotic thoughts falter. The hands did not touch him again, and Galahad let the numbness take him, his mind carried far away.

He fell asleep soon after, the melody of a Sarmatian lullaby lilting softly against the stone walls.

* * *

Galahad awoke some time later, his temples throbbing.

The rest of his body ached, sore from the fight and his wounds, but he found himself clear-headed for the first time in hours. He coughed, his breath coming out in an icy cloud. He tried to sit up and winced; not once, but twice. First at the sharp pain brought about by the broken ribs on his right side, then again as he turned to escape *that* pain only to be quickly reminded of the knife wound on his left. He frowned down at the blood-soaked rag plastered to his torso.

"You've had worse."

The voice came from behind him, and Galahad didn't need to turn his head to know who was speaking. He felt the corner of his mouth lift.

“Like the day you gored me while sparing?”

Lancelot chuckled lightly, crouching at Galahad’s side with a bowl of water in his hands.

“I'll never live that scratch down, will I?”

“I almost bled to death.”

“Yes. Yes, it *was* quite a lot of blood,” Lancelot mused with a smile—as if he hadn't been beside himself with concern at the time. “I thought Tristan would have my head that morning. Three years on, and I still have nightmares about him sending one of those wretched birds to peck out my eyes.”

Galahad smiled, remembering the way Tristan had patently ignored Lancelot for nearly a month after the accident. Even Arthur, usually so protective of Lancelot, had allowed the petty shunning.

Galahad reached for the bloody rag, pealing it back to examine the damage as best he could in the dim lighting.

“It's superficial,” Lancelot said. “More wide than deep, which probably saved your life. You were lucky.”

Far from lucky, Galahad thought, biting his check to keep himself from saying it aloud. By the way in which Lancelot looked at him, it didn't appear as if the older knight believed it either.

Lancelot helped him sit up and lean against the stone wall of their prison. Galahad steadied himself with shaky hands, willing the pain to decrease. The sharp ache settled a bit, but his head continued its manic drumbeat as he eyed their sparse cell. Uneven stone walls, hay spread over the dirt floor. A bucket in the corner left little to the imagination of its intended use. His gaze finally settled on Lancelot, truly taking in his features for the first time. His brother’s face was ashen, beads of sweat glistening against his forehead. Though he was pale, his cheeks were flushed a deep pink.

“Are you well?”

Lancelot demurred, face blank. “You’re one to speak, with your blood all over the floor.”

“Lancelot…”

“A minor sickness. It will pass.”

Galahad reached out, half expecting Lancelot to pull away, but the other man did not. The back of Galahad’s fingers rested against Lancelot’s forehead, hardly needing contact to feel the flush of heat radiating from him.

“You should rest.”

“And sleep while you have all the fun? Drink this.” Lancelot lifted the bowl toward Galahad, who accepted it with greedy hands. The water was sour, but he took several gulps, choking on the excess.

He coughed, wincing at each exhale. Knowing they may be in need of the water later, he waved it away. Lancelot placed the bowl on the floor and Galahad didn't miss the unsteadiness of his hands. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long. Shortly after you were brought in, I believe.”

“*Why* are you here?”

Galahad cursed himself, the question out of his mouth before he could stop himself. He knew why Lancelot was here—because Feris had wished it so.

“That I do not know. The guards spoke little when they collected me from the barracks, less so when they left me here.” He hesitated, quietly adding: “I did hear Feris’ name mentioned, but only in passing.”

Galahad looked away.

He felt Lancelot scoot closer, resting his back against the wall same as Galahad.

“What happened after the attack at the outpost, I would never have…”

“Please, don’t do this,” Galahad said, his eyes downcast. “I would repeat my actions a thousand times over.”

He could sense Lancelot’s frustration, his dark eyes boring into the side of Galahad’s head. He didn't want Lancelot’s pity, nor his absolution. The silence was palpable, as thick as the chilly air around them.

After a time, Lancelot spoke again, his voice soft.

“I know you would, and that is a debt I can never repay.”

They slept that night shoulder to shoulder, their heads resting against each other like they were boys again.

Lancelot did not wake the next morning.

Two days passed in the cell, Lancelot burning from a fever that did not diminish. Galahad used what little water they had left to keep him cool, dabbing a wet rag against his forehead. Sweat poured from Lancelot’s body in rivulets, streaking down his temples and soaking his collar. His face was pocked with redness, a bright rash across his checks and neck.

At the end of the second day, Lancelot’s body convulsed, his eyes rolling back in his head. He shook so violently that Galahad had to force Lancelot’s arms to the ground to keep him

from hurting himself. Galahad screamed for help, begged the guards for aid, but no one came. An old man arrived during the night, leaving a loaf of bread and more water, but he ignored Galahad's pleas, proceeding with his business as if the knight had not spoken at all. On the third day, Lancelot's body burned hot as a brand, his breath growing shallower by the hour. Galahad barely noticed the sweat running down his own temples, nor the patches of red that now dotted the skin along his forearms.

When Lancelot died, Galahad held him for hours afterward, unable to let go. His vision was blurry; from tears, as well as the growing ache in his head. His hand rested against Lancelot's chest, still warm from the fever but growing colder. Unstable to stay awake, Galahad drifted to sleep, dreaming of a great hawk coming to gouge out his eyes.

He was startled awake a short while later by raised voices, Feris' familiar cadence enough to jar his mind out of its fugue. The Reusian was furious, the timbre of his shouts pitched in a way Galahad had rarely heard. He tried to make sense of the noise, but it was lost on him. Galahad expected to be taken, but no one came for him, even after Feris' yells had long faded from the walls of the prison.

They did not remove Lancelot's body.

With what little strength he had, Galahad pulled Lancelot to the far side of the cell, covering his face with the remains of a blanket that had been provided to them. Galahad crawled back to his wall, exhausted. Unable to move any farther, he rested against the cold stone. The room smelled of piss and hay, of irreversible putrefaction.

Alone in the dark, Galahad burned.

* * *

(-*before*-)

"What do you think of, when I'm inside you?" Feris asked one night, snapping his hips in a sudden burst of strength.

"Only you," Galahad bit out, wincing at the change of pace. His fingers clutched at the fur bedding beneath him, his knuckles tensing with every uncomfortable thrust that followed.

Feris laughed above him, knowing by now that Galahad's submission was as false as his carnal provenance. He had no more belief in Galahad's purity than he did of a man rising from the dead—the Romans were fools in many ways, that fact among them—but Feris enjoyed the game of it nonetheless. He liked when Galahad pretended, just as much as he liked when Galahad did *not*, depending on his mood.

Feris' hands found Galahad's waist, his chuckle swallowed up by a grunt as he slid deeper inside, the painful glide of his cock leaving Galahad lightheaded. It hurt tonight. Too little oil, too fast a coupling—he hadn't had time to prepare. Feris had been in assemblies all day, his mind stymied by the trivialities of politics, and he'd returned to his quarters hours earlier than expected. He'd wasted no time in pressing Galahad onto his hands and knees, two spit-covered fingers his only concession.

The meetings had not been to Feris' liking.

Galahad had heard word that an armistice with Rome was being heavily debated among the magistrates, a permanent peace plan set forth by an ambassador who had the King's ear, if not his outright favor. He had not been in Reus long enough to fully comprehend their politics, but he did understand that Feris was not happy with the proposal. The military commanders had persuaded the King for now, but lasting amity with Rome was on the horizon, whether they wished it so or not.

"They will try to take you away from me," Feris had remarked, as he entered him for the first time that night. Now, as Feris shuddered his release, puffs of wine-tainted breath against Galahad's neck, Galahad didn't need Feris to say aloud what he already knew: that the Sarmatian would never see Rome again, so long as Feris lived.

When it was over, Feris pulled out of Galahad and sank into the pillows behind him, his arms crossed over his head. Galahad stayed where he was, his hands slowly uncoiling themselves from the tawny pelage spread atop the bed. It had been a faun once, he thought idly, his fingers curling in the long-dead creature's pelt. Galahad caught his breath and finally moved, sliding to the far side of the bed. He sank onto his side, his back to Feris. Tears prickled at his eyes, and he hated himself more for that particular weakness than the half-hardness between his legs. Both would fade soon enough, he had learned.

A fire crackled across the room, the wood too dry to produce any real heat.

"Do you think he'll kill me, *puer*?" Feris asked, breaking the idle quiet of the room. He yawned, his day soon finished. "Your knight, that is?"

Galahad didn't answer.

"Do you think of *him*, when I'm inside you?"

The question was followed by a hearty chuckle as the commander turned over, his spent cock pressed wetly against Galahad's flank. He ran a hand along Galahad's side, then down through the fresh seed seeping between his thighs. He bit at Galahad's neck, pulling at the skin but not breaking it.

"If I'm a dead man, then let me give him one more reason to kill me."

* * *

(-now-)

Galahad jolted awake, his heart pounding.

He fought to catch his breath, his mind still lingering in a half-remembered nightmare as his eyes darted around the unfamiliar chamber, unable to remember where he was. The musty smell of incense filled the dark room, a familiar tang that permeated the air in Reus like a pungent cloud. The Reusians believed it to be the chosen scent of their god, a heavenly offering. To Galahad it had always smelled like horse shit, days after it had festered in the sun.

He shut his eyes, caught somewhere between dread and resignation.

Feris would not take him back, not as he had before. The freedoms he'd enjoyed had been privy to the knowledge that Galahad would not retaliate against his captor. With Lancelot gone, Feris would have to resort to other means of submission. He might have once simply peddled Galahad to the mines, on the day he'd finally tired of him, but now Galahad's betrayal had likely doomed him to a worse fate.

Yet he wasn't in a cell, nor was he in Feris' quarters, the bed beneath him too soft.

Across the chamber, a set of sheer curtains caught in the evening breeze, whipping out onto the balcony beyond. The night was clear, and the stars blinked in silent greeting. Galahad swallowed, his throat unbearably dry. The room was sweltering, though he couldn't comprehend why. It wasn't quite spring yet, the mornings still cool and damp with frost, yet sweat ran down his temples, soaking into the bedding underneath him. His head was cloudy, and his body ached with disuse.

Galahad didn't remember falling back asleep, nor the days that passed.

He awoke sometime later, warm afternoon light filtering in through the same curtained doorway. His mind was clear, more so than it had been in some time. Galahad turned his head toward the opposite side of his pallet and startled, realizing he was not alone. A woman sat on the edge of the bed, her robes a stormy gray. She peered down at him, her long hair falling in loose dark waves past her shoulders. He would have thought himself mistaken, were it not for the cut across her forehead. The wound had sealed shut already, crusted over several days ago, by the look of it. A large yellow bruise lined the side of her face, but she seemed otherwise unharmed.

Far better than the last time Galahad had seen her, huddled and crying against the courtyard wall.

He moved to sit up, sliding into a more comfortable position against the thick pillows pressed against his back. The woman smiled again, then raised a finger to his face, tapping the end of his nose once and bounding away from the bed, her interest in him already lost.

Galahad frowned in confusion.

“She does that—you shouldn't take offense,” a voice spoke from across the room, and Galahad turned to find a man stretched across an ornate lounger.

The stranger was barefoot, a pile of papers discarded around his ankles. A thin book dangled from his hands, though his interest was now clearly on Galahad. He looked content in his leisure, as if in his own home. The Reusian was dressed like a royal, the golden braids around his waist marking him as not military, but something else. A politician, possibly, or a diplomat. Galahad had seen men outfitted as such at a number of political soirees Feris had made him attend during their months together. The number of braids and colors meant something, though he couldn't recall the specifics.

Galahad leaned back, then winched. His side ached fiercely, but the bandage wrapped around his torso was clean.

For reasons he couldn't fathom, he was unbound.

Galahad glanced back toward the woman, now seated amid a mound of pillows on the floor. She worked to untangle a mass of ribbons, then reform the colorful strands into some unknowable shape.

“She is… well?” he asked, his voice rough from disuse.

The man closed his book.

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

When Galahad didn't respond, the Reusian placed his feet on the floor and leaned closer. “My name is Marcus. We’ve never met I’m afraid. Feris and I tend to keep a distance when forced to share a room.”

Galahad tensed, and Marcus raised his hands slowly, as if trying to calm an anxious mare.

“He has no claim to you any longer. Twenty year's worth of hard-earned personal favors lost in my quest to procure you, but certainly worth it.”

Galahad looked away. “What an inconvenience.”

Marcus frowned, but his eyes suddenly widened in surprise. He had the audacity to look ashamed.

“I did not… that was…” He paused, gathering himself. “I apologize, that didn’t come out as I had intended. I know you have little reason to believe me, nor trust me, but I would owe a lifetime of debts to gain your freedom. You saved my wife’s life.”

When Galahad gave no respond, Marcus continued, not deterred by the silence.

“When the fighting started we were separated. I tried to get to her, but the soldiers barred my path. I truly thought Calla gone, but when I found her later, there she sat, six dead men around her and only scratches. *Scratches*. Most would not think her worthy of rescue, and yet you didn't hesitate.”

Galahad watched the woman as she sorted her ribbons, childlike in her dedication. She was older than Galahad, perhaps ten years or more.

Marcus followed his gaze, his face wistful.

“She was not always like that.”

“What happened?” Galahad asked, pushing his legs over the side of the bed. He knew it was rude to inquire so blatantly, but bluntness was all he could muster.

If Marcus seemed bothered, he didn't show it.

“A plague ravaged Reus many years ago. It killed thousands in those dire months, decimated entire families, mine included. The fever sickness overtook Calla and our infant son, but only Calla survived. When she finally woke, the illness had burned away her mind.”

Galahad looked down at his hands, turning them over in his lap. A memory of fever gripped him, of Lancelot’s body shaking in his arms. Now, only faded red marks remained on his skin.

“I was sick…”

Marcus seemed to understand his confusion, for he shook his head gently. “I’m sorry about Sir Lancelot; I truly am. My people share a great wariness of plague, and any symptoms are met with great suspicion. Feris left you there, fearing contamination after he found out his guards had placed you both together. By the time I was able to secure your release, your friend had already passed.”

“I should have died too,” Galahad said, his voice catching in a dry cough.

The other man stood, taking up a pitcher on a table nearby and pouring the contents into a cup. He handed the water to Galahad, who drank eagerly.

“You were ill, yes, but not with plague. I suspect it was a malaise that affects Reusian children—they are beset with mild fevers and rashes, but only for a few days. In adults not exposed to it in their youth, however, it can be quite deadly. Your friend likely contracted the sickness in the mines.”

He took the cup from Galahad, pouring more. “You burned for days, several more before I had you brought here. A night longer, and we would not likely be having this conversation. Your fever broke only yesterday.”

Galahad drained the cup, suddenly tired again.

Marcus returned to his papers and gathered them into a bundle. He placed them on a desk nearby, setting the book on top.

“I understand you have questions. I'll answer them as best I can, although I fear you will not like the answers.”

Galahad looked up, frowning. “What’s another master to me? Rome or Reus, Reus or Rome. It’s all the same.”

“You're not a slave.”

“But you own me.”

“I do, but you may walk out of the city as you please, at any time.”

Galahad looked down, twisting the cup. “If that's true, then I must to find my brothers.”

“If that is your prerogative, then I'll help you as best I can. But it's been several months since you were captured, and your knights were scattered far beyond Reus. When Feris found out about the peace accords with Rome, it seems likely he dispersed them purposefully, to owners who would sell them quickly, or to those not amenable to returning them.”

“Are you saying I can't find them?”

“I’m saying, you cannot search every farm and amphitheater between here and the Aegean Sea, try as you might.”

“Arthur would help me.”

“I have little doubt, but it's unlikely his informants will have any more information than mine currently do. As an ambassador I'm granted special privileges in the cities I enter. If you seek information, this will be where we find it. I've made friends, as well as useful enemies, who may be able to help.” He sighed, shaking his head. "I cannot stop you if you wish to leave on your own search, or return to your commander. But should you choose to remain, I swear upon my life to do everything in my power to help you find your comrades. My home is open to you if you stay.”

“I have no place in Reus. Feris will not abide my presence.”

Marcus nodded. “That's true, I'm afraid. The King was gracious enough to grant my request, and Feris was rebuked in the process. He did not take it well.”

Galahad frowned. “I'm in danger then?”

“Quite the contrary, Sarmatian. You're already dead.”

* * *

Galahad stood under the gallows, looking up at the figure hanging before him. There was no breeze today, and the corpse swayed limply, as silent as only death could manage. The blood had stopped flowing days ago, the lithe form bloated and turning black. The body had

belonged to a young man once, but it was now only a lump of torn meat, shreds of bone and shriveled muscle dangling where limbs had once been.

The dais below was still covered in dried blood, the cracks in the stone permanently spoiled by death.

His death.

The body was adorned in Galahad's armor, or enough of it to make a convincing lie. The breast plate and gauntlets he'd worn the morning of the Reusian incursion, his belt. The boots were not his, though they were of Roman design. The man's face was unrecognizable, but his hair was short and dark, trimmed not unlike Galahad's own.

"Who was he?" Galahad asked, glancing over at Marcus from under his cowl.

The man shrugged lightly, robed shoulders barely moving. "A murderer and a thief. He was not a good man and his death was inevitable, yet he had the unfortunate luck of sharing a resemblance to you. What Feris couldn't counterfeit in features, he simply beat out of the man before parading him to his death."

"They tore him apart."

"Feris' men knew of your betrayal. They saw it the day you ran, and it made Feris look weak. He had to make an example of someone. With you out of his reach, he simply found another."

Galahad looked up again, watching his surrogate dangle.

"We should go," Marcus said, taking his elbow. "It's unlikely you'll be recognized, but I'd rather not take the chance so soon."

They walked back to the palace, Marcus still holding his arm, wary that Galahad might stumble. He was still recovering, his body unbearably tired no matter how long he slept. When they returned to Marcus' quarters, dinner had been prepared and they sat in front of the hearth eating dark bread and honeyed pork. Galahad's appetite hadn't returned, but he ate what he could.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Marcus said carefully, picking at his food. He seemed rattled by the casual butchery.

Galahad took a drink of wine, letting it wash away the taste of ash on his tongue.

"Is this my life then? Sneaking around in the shadows? I want to help search for my brothers —I *need* to help search."

"Then you will, in time. Right now, you must focus on healing. Your sickness was serious, to say nothing of your other wounds. You very nearly died."

Galahad looked away, afraid Marcus would be able to read the apathy on his face.

I wish I had, he mused wearily.

Yet he thought of Lancelot’s body in his arms, of the suffering the rest of his brothers must be going through. He couldn't abandon them.

If this was the way to save them, then this was the life he had to choose.

* * *

(-later-)

“Are you well?”

Galahad startled, jarred from his reverie by the whispered question.

He glanced up, the *ligare* mask biting into his cheek. Cae towered above him, his dark hood angled inquisitively. Galahad couldn't see the Reusian’s face, though over the years he'd gotten better at reading the larger man’s body language easily enough.

Galahad shrugged, peering back across the room toward the table of men. The Roman and Reusian representatives had been arguing for the past hour about fishing trade routes and spawning grounds. Both Arthur and Marcus had joined the group, though only to offer support should the need arise. Neither looked particularly pleased to be there. Galahad was ready to throw them *all* out of a window if they got into one more quarrel about the carnal lives of trout.

Fishing trade routes—gods above. If this was what it took to run an empire, he'd gladly live out his days in the woods.

Across the room, Dagonet appeared just as board. Although the knight would look alert to anyone who did not know him, Galahad saw through the careful façade. When he was tired, Dag had a tendency to subtly fidget, as he did now, spinning a ring on his finger as his eyes remained angled toward the ceiling. He looked well though, all things considered.

The goodwill exchange of prisoners had been crucial in those early days of negotiations. Returning the men unharmed—Reusian and Roman alike—had been the most fraught part of the process. Galahad had trusted no one save himself to see it done, once he had realized Dagonet had been located.

The journey to Rome had been exhausting, long days and even longer nights. The Reusian soldiers had watched Dag and the other prisoners with thinly disguised hatred, the possibility of peace unwelcome after a lifetime of fighting. Dagonet in particular had drawn their ire—their personal allegiance to Feris making his presence a bitter pill to swallow. A handful of the soldiers had grown bolder as the days passed, whispering amongst themselves as they scowled at the prisoners through the bars of the transport wagon. They never acted on their rebellious thoughts, however, their ambitions curtailed by the presence of a single *ligare* guard who spent his nights with his back pressed against the wagon.

Galahad had been able to sense their curiosity towards him, their wariness. The rumors of *ligare* prowess were not taken lightly, and many veteran Reusian soldiers went out of their way to avoid them all together. Most of the men had no appetite for outright treason, but not all of them. On the last night before reaching Roman territory—anger and alcohol flowing in equal parts around the campfire—an argument had broken out. Galahad had already taken his evening post at the wagon, dropping down to rest just below Dagonet. The older man had grown used to his presence over the voyage, though neither had ever uttered a single word to the other. When the angry voices grew louder, he hadn't recoiled when Galahad had surreptitiously slipped a dagger through the bars. He'd simply nodded and slid the weapon under a blanket, awaiting his fate.

Calmer heads eventually prevailed that night, the drunken Reusian who'd started the row soon back to snoring loudly across the clearing. The next morning, when Dag had tried to return the dagger to Galahad, Galahad had only shaken his head, motioning for him to keep it. The thought of revealing himself then had been overwhelming—Dag so close he could have touched him. But the mission hadn't been over then. It wasn't over now.

One knight still eluded him.

Leave it to Tristan to vanish so fucking completely.

Voices drew Galahad's attention back to the table, and he realized the negotiations were over. Years of warfare and strife, eventually settled over a riverbed. The men all shook hands, the relief palpable on both sides. Marcus smiled warmly at his apprentice, squeezing the teenager's shoulder. He didn't look at Galahad, but Galahad knew. What they'd both worked so long to achieve was finally finished. They'd won. Yet even as he watched, the joy Galahad had believed he would feel did not arise within him. The burden hadn't lifted. If anything, it clamped tighter around him, threatening to choke him. His dark thoughts followed him like a shadow as he and Cae escorted Marcus back to his quarters. There was little time to talk, though Galahad could sense Marcus' desire to speak with him privately. The gala would be starting soon, the noise of the celebratory crowd in the courtyard growing with every passing minute.

As the servants made quick work of preparing Marcus for the evening, the *ligare* also changed into their ceremonial costumes. Their plain cloaks were replaced by formfitting black tunics, the sleeves embroidered with golden flowers.

Placing the *ligare* mask back against his face, Galahad ran the ties under the curls at the base of his neck, securing them tightly. His hair had grown unruly the past few months, his days too busy to bother with having it trimmed. Although he'd been tying it back for some time, Aella had vehemently insisted he wear it down while in Festus.

"If you let those out," she had said, tugging lightly on one of his earlobes, "you might as well go without a mask. Your friends would 'ave to be blind to not notice such spritely features."

Annoyed as he was by her comments, he'd taken great care since then to keep his hood up. Tonight though, he wore his hair long, the waves of brown tinted flaxen at his temples. They'd spent weeks riding in Reus' northern-most territories, the air warmer, the sun brighter. Britain had its charms, certainly, but he'd never once missed its pluvial weather.

They entered the gala an hour later, Marcus cheerfully greeting the guests who'd gathered near the door to speak with him. There was still much to do with regards to mending the relationship between the wary nations, but Marcus was allowing himself a moment to bask in the pleasure of their success.

It made Galahad happy to see him so content.

Across the room Arthur was also in high spirits as he clasped hands with the attendees. The Roman's cheerfulness was genuine, though the tight smile he wore was the same Galahad had only seen him reserve for unwelcome guests at the outpost. He couldn't blame Arthur for his distrust of the Reusians, for his anger with regards to Lancelot's death, but his particular antagonism toward Marcus was inexplicable. No one had worked harder to help free Arthur's wayward knights—and that was simply on the surface of what Arthur knew.

Marcus had set up their meeting the night before as a means for Galahad to reveal himself, but the conversation had spiraled too quickly out of control. He'd managed it well enough—not simply divulging the truth, as it was clear Galahad did not wish it—but there had been an undeniable tension between both men since then. Galahad could only hope, when the time finally came to disclose his participation in all of this, Arthur would forgive him.

That they all would forgive him.

He'd done what he could for them, in his own way. His trespasses, though well intentioned, were perhaps unforgivable, and he had made his peace with that. His brothers would never be able to look at him in the same way—to know the things he had done, and treat him as one of them again. He was tainted by his choices. He had long wondered what he would do, should he finally be able to complete his mission. To find Tristan healthy, to bring him home safe. Although Marcus took great care to never say so, Galahad knew the other man long suspected Tristan to be dead.

Yet he still allowed the search to continue. He paid his spies for information, set up scouting visits to cities on the fringes of the Reusian empire, allowed Galahad the means to continue his fruitless hunt. Marcus loved him, in his own way. Whether it was affection or pity that fueled Marcus' motivation to help him, however, Galahad didn't know.

What would Galahad do, were he to find proof of Tristan's passing? To look upon a field where slaves were buried, and know with certainty that Tristan's body was below the dirt, long rotted. To find out he had spent his years searching for a ghost. He'd imagined their meeting in so many different ways, but it always ended with a look of repulsion in Tristan's eyes. Out of all the knights, it would be Tristan who most easily recognized the parts of Galahad's soul that he'd freely bartered away.

The day of their defeat, bound together in Feris' tent, Tristan had watched with an indifferent gaze as Galahad offered himself in Lancelot's place, the older knight's body still as stone as the others struggled around him. Before that day, Galahad had been so angry with Tristan—so wounded by his callousness, his cruel words.

Now the irony was not lost on him that Tristan had been right all along.

If he found Tristan alive—and gods, did he wish it so; he would risk Tristan hating him just to see him again—perhaps it was in Galahad's best interest to stay dead. He'd told Marcus as such, with a promise he would reconsider telling them the truth, but now it seemed a far less cruel fate for all of them. Let them mourn, and then forget. Galahad did not know yet what Arthur's plans were—what *any* of their plans were. He knew they intended to wait for Bors to arrive, but after that, he couldn't say. None of the knights were at the party, although given his last encounter with Gawain, it was likely for the best.

Servants passed with trays of food and Galahad felt his stomach roil at the pleasant smell. He hadn't eaten today, his exhaustion overwhelming his hunger until now.

To his left, Galahad noticed Danus enter the chamber. The plates of the older man's ceremonial armor clanked together loudly as the Reusian commander strode toward the center of the room where Marcus entertained a group of businessmen. Galahad tensed, stepping forward as Aella did the same, though both of them knew that Danus was one of Marcus's strongest allies within the Reusian court.

Something was wrong.

Danus drew closer, ducking to hastily whisper something into Marcus' ear.

Marcus balked and paled, his eyes flickering in thought.

Galahad moved closer, but loud voices in the corridor drew his attention to the doors. A group of six men entered the gala, their worn riding leathers a far cry from the well-dressed patricians who mingled around them supping on oysters and sweet wines. A wary phalanx of Roman and Reusian soldiers escorted the men, though their swords were not drawn.

A man emerged from the middle of the gathering, his arms held high in greeting.

"Friends!" he announced, a delighted smile upon his face. "I hope I'm not too late to share in this glorious day."

Galahad stilled, his fists clenching at his sides.

Feris had arrived.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Comments/Kudos are always welcome. ❤

If you found this story via a fic rec post, I'd really love to know where you saw it. Just drop me a line in the comments or on my writing Tumblr.

* * *

In my heart I plan to finish this; if only my brain would cooperate. :(

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